THE CATSPAW

WILLIAM LE QUEUX

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WHAT THIS STORY IS ABOUT

Claudia Erba, of the wonderful Titian hair and charming voice, was a "turn" on the third-rate music halls, but Charles Laidlaw, son of Sir Francis Laidlaw, loved her. An immense success was promised her when Salmon, the great variety agent, took her up and "boomed" her. He promoted her from a third-rate to a front-rank star, and sent her, in order to give her a preliminary *cachet*, to the leading music hall in Rome. But before sending her he gave her a mysterious warning. And in Rome Claudia found trouble awaiting her.

How she was blackmailed, how she discovered why Salmon had helped her and found that he was working for a great Organisation, and how these things affected Charles Laidlaw's love for her, makes a thrilling and absorbing story.

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

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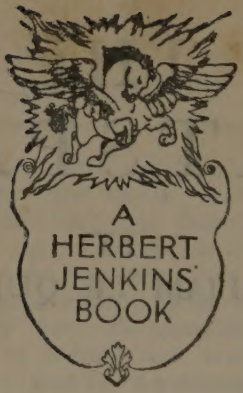
THE CATSPAW

BY

WILLIAM LE QUEUX

HERBERT JENKINS LIMITED
3 YORK STREET ST. JAMES'S
LONDON S.W.1



Third printing completing 15,030 *copies*

Made and Printed in Great Britain by
The Camelot Press Limited,
London and Southampton

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CHAPTER I

THE BOHEMIAN RESTAURANT

"YOU know, dearest Claudia, we are the closest friends, but I wonder if you have guessed how often I have envied you."

It was Maudie Farrell who spoke, comédienne and dancer, as she was billed in the programmes of the smaller music-halls. Her talent was not sufficient to procure her engagements at the larger establishments. She was supping at the well-known little restaurant in Soho, beloved of Bohemians, presided over by the fat old Luigi, most popular and genial of proprietors.

Miss Farrell was tall and fair, with no pretensions to prettiness. The pleasant expression of her face, her bright smile, alone redeemed her from absolute plainness. But, to make amends, she had a superb figure.

Claudia Erba, the companion whom she addressed, raised her handsome face, crowned with the dark red hair so often seen in Tuscany, and regarded her friend with calm inquiring eyes. Claudia—"The Red Ragazza," as she was known amongst her intimates—possessed that beauty that Miss Farrell lacked. Her figure might have failed to satisfy the critical judgment

of an artist, but it was lithe, slender, and straight. Her feet and hands were exquisitely modelled, and her animated gestures, as she talked, had the natural grace and freedom of a daughter of the warm Southern climes.

"You envy me? *Nom de Dieu*, why?" Claudia was an accomplished linguist; she could speak Italian, her own language, French and English with equal fluency, even to their slang. Her age was twenty-three, but her roving and cosmopolitan life had given her ripe experience.

Miss Farrell, who was some years older than her friend, leaned across the small table and whispered confidentially:

"I ought not to have used the word envy. What I mean is, I wish I could change places with you without your being one penny the worse."

"You are getting mixed up, dear Maudie," laughed the beautiful Italian. "If we change places, you take mine and I take yours, and, as you say you envy me, I should be worse. But I know what you mean."

"You see, Claudia, you have a line of your own."

"A very small one, I fear," interrupted Claudia, with a slight grimace.

"Small or not, you have hardly any competition. There are dozens, I was going to say hundreds, of girls who do my sort of turn as well, and often better. There is hope for you, none for me."

"I have been living on hope for some years, and I'm not rich yet," remarked Claudia.

"I had a chance once," went on Miss Farrell in musing tones, "when I got on in the living statues;

my one good point, my figure, scored there. But I had no sooner started than the slump came, and there was an end of that."

Claudia nodded her head in sympathy. "Yes, it was shocking bad luck. Well, cheer up. You might be doing worse; you might be a mannequin or an artists' model. Not much chance of getting rich in either of those crowded professions."

But Miss Farrell was not to be comforted. The tears were very near her eyes. "How is it all going to end?" she asked, in a voice that quivered. "I can carry on for a few years longer; in London it is all right, in the provinces hateful, and then I shall not be wanted. Younger girls will push me out of my poor little place. Remember, I am eight years older than you. I haven't youth to buoy me up."

Claudia's light manner changed swiftly. Her own eyes became misty, as she leaned forward and spoke with the impulsiveness of her Southern race.

"Oh, darling, you hurt me. Are we not what, in your English language, you call pals? You see, I know some English slang. Well, what does it mean to be what you call pals? I will tell you—one purse, one home. Do you understand?"

Maudie Farrell looked at her steadily. "Do you mean that, little Claudia?" she asked in a low voice.

"Do I ever say what I do not mean?" cried Claudia indignantly. "Now, listen. My dear old father, Beppo Erba, lives in Percy Road, Brixton. As you know, he carves cheap furniture for the big West End firms, who make fortunes out of him—fortunes, my dear!" Claudia raised protesting hands against the

greed of capitalists. " Well, my father's home is yours. Can I say more ? "

Maudie Farrell wiped her eyes. " You are a darling," she said simply. " Some day——" She left the sentence unfinished, but Claudia knew what her friend intended to convey. If ever the positions were reversed, Claudia would be the debtor and not the creditor.

Good old Luigi bustled about. He was getting old now, and he had reduced a once fine business to a struggling one by his lack of initiative, by his incapacity to keep up with the times. In despair, he had called in the aid of a smart young Frenchman, named Laroche, who had put a few hundreds into the concern, and was breathing a spark of life into the dying embers.

Luigi stopped opposite the table occupied by the two girls.

" My dear young ladies," he cried in his flamboyant, paternal manner (all his customers were his children), " you have been well served ? The Maison Luigi has not yet lost its reputation ? "

Claudia lifted up her radiant face. " All is excellent, dear Signor Luigi. Can we have another portion of that superb spaghetti ? "

" Willingly, my children," was Luigi's answer. " You shall have it on the table in two minutes."

And while they waited Claudia hummed under her breath one of the old Tuscan *stornelli* from the Val di Chiana :

Flor de graneto.
Chi ve lo Mattara L'annello'n deto ?
Si'n ve lo metto io, mojo danneto.

But they waited in vain. The good Luigi, in his tour round the small rooms, was detained by several other customers. The spaghetti for the two young ladies was forgotten.

Five, ten minutes passed, and Claudia felt that something had happened. Fat old Luigi was a dear in many ways, but he had no memory. His head was like a sieve. She rapped loudly on the table with her fork.

Monsieur Laroche, dressed immaculately in a frock coat and a spotless white waistcoat, hurried to her.

With true Gallic politeness he bowed low till his white waistcoat had almost disappeared from view. He was desolated that the two young ladies should have to wait. What was it that they desired?

Claudia, who never got in a temper, smiled indulgently. "The dear good Luigi promised us another portion of spaghetti. He has apparently forgotten."

The young Frenchman bowed, and retreated hurriedly. It was evident he could not trust himself to express an opinion on the delinquencies of his fat partner. In a trice the dish was placed on the table by an agile waiter. Signor Luigi was still gyrating slowly round, exchanging compliments with his old patrons, and quite oblivious of their corporeal necessities.

The girls consumed their extra dish, lighted cigarettes, and ordered coffee and liqueurs. It was a Bohemian establishment, and very few persons outside Bohemia ever entered its hospitable portals.

Claudia looked across the table at her friend, as she blew the cigarette smoke through her dainty nostrils.

" Confess it, dear old girl, you are afraid," she said in her low, penetrating voice.

Maudie answered in a voice as low as her own, " Yes, I am afraid—you know of what."

Claudia nodded. " It is the fear that always haunts us, children of fortune that we are. In a few weeks we shall be ' out,' without a shop, as they say in your language. Half starvation, while we are looking for a job, a little put by when we get into one. Years passed in a weary round till we get middle-aged. We have to tramp and tramp, and wait and wait then, till we can snatch at something, something that will just keep the wolf from the door. And then old age comes, and what is there in front of us then ? "

Something like a sob had crept into the girl's voice, and she buried her face in her hands, repeating brokenly : " What is in front of us then, when nobody will take us on ? "

The English girl looked at her companion steadfastly. It was a cold face, in a way, but the eyes, the windows of the soul, were not unkindly. Years of struggle and disappointment had embittered her, but she still kept a warm heart.

" Claudia dearest, you are a baby, to be whimpering there, while I am always close to a week's notice. I have only my figure to offer for what it is worth, as a mannequin or an artists' model. You have always your voice, that glorious gift that comes straight from God."

" No more God's gift than your glorious figure," flashed out Claudia passionately. " You talk of my voice as if it were to last till the crack of doom. Well,

now, I will tell you, because you are my friend—my pal. For two months I have been in the hands of a doctor, a great doctor, a specialist in Harley Street. He has seen me in my turns at the little music-halls where I am employed. What is his verdict? "

Maudie Farrell became sympathetic at once. " Darling, I never knew of this. Tell me what he said."

The Italian girl laughed harshly. " You might guess without my telling you. It was a slender organ to start with, cultivated into artificial strength. At the best it may last for five or six years. At the present rate, screeching at the halls every night, it will give out, probably, before that."

She drained her liqueur glass, and looked at her friend with a kind of gloomy satisfaction.

" What about my voice, with my little catchy songs, against your figure in two years' time? Who will be top dog then? "

" Oh, Claudia darling, if I had known, if I could have guessed! I would have bitten my tongue out sooner than have said the words. I did not envy you really."

Claudia looked up at her with her bright smile. " Of course, you did not know, and you could not guess. Anyway, we will always be sworn comrades. And whoever is top dog will help the under dog. It may be my turn to-day, yours to-morrow. Is that a bargain? "

" It is a bargain," said Maudie Farrell solemnly. And to her credit, be it recorded, she never broke away from her plighted word.

Claudia, true daughter of the sunny South, soon

recovered her spirits, after that momentary depression. She raised her glass with a careless gesture.

" Begone, dull care," she cried, in her clear, ringing voice.

" Begone, dull care," repeated Miss Farrell, in less convincing tones. To tell the absolute truth, Maudie Farrell was a pessimist of the first water, and could never be induced to look on the bright side of things.

It was closing time. Claudia had done her early turns at the two music-halls where she was engaged. Maudie had done one little ordinary performance. The two girls had partaken of a late supper ; no true Bohemian ever likes to go to bed early. And, from force of old habit, they lingered still in this atmosphere of tomato soup, salmi, spaghetti, and all the other accompaniments of an Italian restaurant.

And, just as they were putting on their cloaks, there arrived at the little Soho restaurant a very striking individual in the person of Mr. Lewis Levi.

He was a very prominent personage indeed. On the third finger of his right hand glistened an enormous diamond. On his expansive shirt front two other diamonds of minor brilliancy presented a comparatively humble appearance.

Claudia regarded him with undisguised respect.

" You know who that is, of course," she whispered to her friend.

Maudie Farrell answered back, " I'm afraid I don't know him from Adam. You see, Claudia, I'm awfully ignorant."

Claudia was very excited. " But, Maudie, he is a very great man, a very great man indeed. He is hand

in glove with all the big agents, all the big halls. If he takes up any girl he can make her. I was introduced to him at a supper a few nights ago. I wonder if he remembers me."

It appeared that Mr. Levi did remember her. After throwing a sharp glance round the tables and ignoring the glances of obsequious waiters, he went to the two young women and removed his hat with a flourish. He addressed Claudia at once, offering his fat, beringed hand.

" Delighted to meet you again, signorina. I looked in for a little supper, but I find it is too late. There is, however, just time for a little something. Shall we say liqueurs and coffee ? "

He did not wait for assent, but beckoned to a hovering waiter. " Quick, Giuseppe, we have only a quarter of an hour. Three Benedictines and three coffees, *toute de suite*. You understand."

Then, handing his hat to the waiter, he seated himself by the side of Claudia Erba, the beautiful and vivacious Italian girl, known to her intimates as " The Red Ragazza."

CHAPTER II

MR. LEWIS LEVI

"LET me introduce you to my greatest friend, Miss Farrell," said Claudia to the expansive Mr. Levi. "You have heard of her, of course?"

"Oh, yes." He turned towards the young woman. "You're at the Cosmopolitan, are you not? Business pretty good there, I should say. I was in the other night, but I didn't stop for your turn. I'm sorry, but I had another appointment."

He was quite polite; he never forgot his manners even in the society of the least important people. But it was easy to see he was not at all interested in Miss Farrell. And Maudie divined the fact at once, and for this and other reasons took a hearty dislike to him.

"It's very lucky I dropped in here to-night." His gaze was fixed on Claudia as he spoke. "For you were just the person I wanted to see."

The girl's face flushed with pleasure. As a man he probably did not appeal to her any more than to her friend. But she knew he was an influential person in her world, with considerable interests in the music-hall profession. It surely meant something that he should want to see her. People who knew

him were sure of one thing—that he never wasted his time.

Claudia laughed a little nervously. "I am glad we came here, then. It was just a toss-up that we did not go to Pinoli's. But we love the dear fat Luigi for old times' sake, and that new man Laroche has brushed the place up wonderfully."

"Yes," assented Mr. Levi, a little absently. He seemed as if he were about to say something, then checked himself, and drummed with his fingers on the table.

Maudie Farrell took the hint; the pause and the action told her that she was in the way, that what he had to say to Claudia could not be said before a third person.

She rose. "If you will excuse me, I will be going. I half promised I would be back early, and now it is fearfully late. Good-bye for the present. Good night, Mr. Levi."

A warm kiss to her friend, a rather cold bow to the Jewish gentleman, and the girl was gone, leaving the pair alone, before Claudia could press her to stay.

Levi smiled approvingly. She did not interest him, but she was evidently a sensible young woman, who knew when her room was preferable to her company.

"Ah, that's better," he said cheerfully. "The old saying that two's company applies to business as well as pleasure. Nice kind of girl, your friend, I should say." This he added to propitiate Claudia. "Sorry she isn't in a better line. There's too much competition nowadays."

Claudia sighed. "Yes, I feel that too, and she knows it quite well herself. Well, Mr. Levi, you alluded to business." She spoke eagerly, and her heart beat fast.

"Yes, I spoke of business." Lewis Levi was as calm as she was excited, and fixed his shrewd, black eyes upon her with a steady, penetrating gaze. "I take it you are ambitious, you want to get on, not stick in the same rut for the next ten years."

Claudia clasped her hands, and her cheeks glowed: "Oh, of course, I would love to be famous, to earn ten times what I do, and give dear papa a good time: But, alas, I have such a small talent. My old *maestro* in Tuscany did wonders with my voice, but you cannot make a little thing big." A note of despair had crept into her tones as she remembered the verdict of the Harley Street specialist.

The man Levi regarded her intently. "What you say is indisputable to us who know, and refuse to be gulled. But the great public, I care not of what nationality, does *not* know, and is easily gulled. Advertise judiciously that your goose is a swan, and the odds are, if you keep on long enough, they will accept it as a swan themselves. Please don't think my illustration offensive."

"Oh, dear, no," answered Claudia meekly. "I quite know that, in the sense you mean, I am quite an ordinary little goose." She shook her beautiful head with a gesture of finality. "Nobody could ever make me a swan."

Mr. Levi smiled pleasantly. "Let's drop metaphor and come to facts. You have just one of those peculiar

talents in regard to which public opinion can be manufactured. You are singing now at second and third-rate halls, and if you stop in them you will be classed permanently as a third-rate artist. You've got to get out of the rut."

"And how am I to do it?" inquired the girl breathlessly.

Levi paused some seconds before he replied. "You have heard of Salmon, the big variety agent?"

Claudia nodded. Who in the profession had not heard of him, the great and only Salmon, the man who had got on his books all the "stars," the man who drove to his offices in a resplendent motor-car, and was reported to be rolling in money?

"Of course I have heard of him, Mr. Levi. But what is the good of him to me? He won't look at anybody who's not in the front rank."

"Tut, tut," cried Levi impatiently. "That's what people say who are frightened of him. Of course, he's got most of the big people, because it's the fashion to go to him. But he always keeps his eyes open for fresh talent."

Claudia leaned her arms upon the table and gazed at her companion with all her soul in her eyes. What was it leading to, that a great man like Levi, the bosom friend of the even greater Salmon, should seek her out in this fashion and declare he was glad to have met her?

"Now listen, signorina," went on Levi, in his smooth, imperturbable manner. "You may have heard Salmon and I are great friends; as a matter of fact, we have joint interests in many professional

ventures, for he does not make his money solely out of his agency."

He paused a few seconds, and then spoke more briskly. " Well, now to come to the point. Salmon heard your turn the other night, and was considerably impressed. He spoke to me about it the next morning. What he said, in effect, was, ' Here is a girl who is wasting her chances for want of a helping hand. If I took her up, in six months I would make a big success of her. I've half a mind to try.' "

Could she believe her ears? Was it possible that the great and powerful Salmon had said this of her? She smiled as she remembered the out-at-elbow impressario who had first taken her up in Tuscany when she was little more than a child, had grumbled at and rated her, and vowed she would never repay him for the trouble he was expending on her training.

Levi's keen eyes noted the impression his words were making on her. " I had the pleasure of meeting you a few nights ago, and was equally impressed. I told him I knew you, and urged him to give you a chance. The result is, that you are to go to Salmon's offices in Green Street, Leicester Square, any day you like. Here is my card ; send it in with your own, and I promise you you need not be anxious about your reception."

Claudia held out her arm across the table to the magnificent Mr. Levi.

" Pinch me—do something to make me sure that I am alive and in full possession of my senses," she cried impetuously.

Mr. Levi pressed the slender hand impressively ; he could not be cruel enough to hurt her.

" You're a grateful little girl," he said, with a smile that obliterated the somewhat sinister expression of his fat, hawk-like face. " I wonder, when you are a great star, if you'll bestow a thought on me, or, for the matter of that, on Salmon either."

" Oh, but you are cruel and cynical," she cried reproachfully. " Well, I must go and tell the news to dear papa ; I wish that Maudie had stayed to hear all this. But, before we go, there is just time for us to have one more liqueur. You have it with me, you understand. It is my treat."

Levi protested, as became a man of wealth and gallantry. Monstrous that a woman should pay for a man's drink ! But Claudia silenced him with an imperious wave of her hand.

" No, no, it must be as I say. If I let you pay now, we should change the luck. Giuseppe, two Benedictines, quick ; we have just a minute."

They raised their glasses. " To the new ' star,' " cried Levi, bowing with great gallantry.

Claudia rose and swept him a curtsey. " To my good and kind friend, Mr. Levi, and also to the excellent Mr. Salmon, who, I hope, will be my good friend too. And now I must fly to papa. It is late."

Levi accompanied her to the door. " You will want a taxi, I suppose ? "

Claudia made a little grimace ; she had, in full measure, the frugality of the Southern nations. " It is an unpardonable extravagance, but I am so late, and I fear I shall have missed the last 'bus. But what does it matter, on a night like this ? Yes, a taxi, or poor dear papa will think I am lost."

" Where do you live, mademoiselle ? "

She told him her address—Percy Road, Brixton. The excellent Mr. Levi smiled, showing his strong, even teeth. Claudia, intoxicated with the glamour of this wonderful night, thought he looked quite handsome. A little elderly, perhaps, but well preserved, and of a fascination indescribable.

" Our ways lie together," he cried gaily. " I live at Tulse Hill. The taxi shall be mine, and I will drop you in the Percy Road. Excellent."

They got in together, and chatted easily on topics of mutual interest. Under the circumstances, an ordinary man might have improved the occasion and ventured on a mild flirtation with such an extremely pretty girl, and Claudia, brought up in the free-and-easy atmosphere of the music-hall stage, might not have repulsed him very severely. But Mr. Levi was not sentimental, and did not tax her good nature.

The taxi turned into a depressing road of one of the most depressing suburbs of London, and stopped before the house that sheltered the future " star " and the simple old Beppo, wood-carver and visionary.

Levi alighted first, helped her out, and held out his hand. " I see you have your latch-key. Well, it is getting late. I will say good night."

Claudia lifted her shining eyes to his ; she was certainly a very pretty girl, he thought.

" Oh, but you must come in for a moment to see poor papa. When I have told him the news he will be miserable to think that he cannot thank you himself."

She looked very bewitching. The excitement of that wonderful evening had lent a rich glow to her beauty. She was in love with everything and everybody. She could have embraced the waiter, Levi, even fat old Luigi himself, in the fullness of her heart.

Levi hesitated. He had really no wish to make the acquaintance of the old wood-carver, who, probably, could not speak two words of any language he understood, and would prove a tiresome person. Still, this impetuous girl wished it, and it would be wise to humour her. She seemed more grateful than the average run of young women he had come across.

He yielded with a good grace. "I'm really charmed, but you must let me go in five minutes after I have shaken the good papa by the hand."

Claudia opened the door, Levi having bidden the taxi-driver to wait. Together they traversed the small hall, lighted by a feeble lamp, and, ascending the narrow staircase to the front room, found Beppo Erba reading.

The place was very humble, Levi thought, accustomed as he was to his own luxurious surroundings—more humble than he had expected. Beppo must make something out of his wood carving, and Claudia's salary could certainly afford something more comfortable than this. He supposed it was due to their temperamental thrift.

Claudia would spend money on dress and dainty little meals at restaurants, but she was not going to waste it on useless externals that provided no immediate pleasure.

Signor Beppo Erba was a small man, somewhat

obese, with a fleshy face, clean shaven. Obviously Claudia had not inherited her good looks from the paternal side. His appearance was redeemed from absolute insignificance by a huge mop of silver white hair, which lent an air of dignity to the head.

Claudia rushed to the little man, gave him a resounding kiss on his fat cheek, and explained the events of the night in voluble Italian. When he had grasped the situation, Signor Erba extended his hand and spoke in halting English.

"I tank you ver mooch for your kindness to my little girl. She has talent, eh? Yes, we Erbas 'ave all the talent, but we 'ave no good fortune. I am an artist myself, and I make miserable money. You tink she will be famous?"

"Yes, I think my friend Salmon will make her famous," answered Levi, speaking very slowly, so that the fat little Italian could understand him. Claudia, to make sure, translated the words into their own language, and Signor Erba's face was wreathed in smiles. Again he repeated, "I tank you ver mooch."

As it was impossible to carry on anything in the nature of a sustained conversation with her father, Levi addressed himself for the next few minutes to Claudia, till such time as he could decently withdraw.

Alone in the taxi, *en route* for his big house at Tulse Hill, where he kept up considerable state and gave parties to the professionals of his acquaintance, Lewis Levi smiled quietly.

"A warm-hearted little soul, and, I should say, grateful. Well, Salmon ought to do something with

her. He's experienced enough at this sort of thing."

And Claudia went to bed dreaming beatific dreams of bouquets, ovations, enthusiastic audiences, and obsequious managers pressing on her magnificent contracts.

CHAPTER III

A MOMENTOUS INTERVIEW

CLAUDIA was very wakeful that night, and longed feverishly for the morning. It came at last. A hastily snatched breakfast, a hurried kiss to Papa Beppo, and she was on her way to Green Street. She set out very bravely, her brain crowded with roseate visions of the future.

But when she neared the abode of the great and only Salmon a reaction set in. Her heart beat violently, and she ascended the stairs very slowly.

She had her own agent, a gentleman who occupied two rooms in a dingy street in the neighbourhood of the Strand. One of these was a waiting-room filled with chorus girls congregated at all hours of the day, on the chance of picking up an engagement, and derelict members of the music-hall profession of both sexes. Several of them brought their lunch with them, in the shape of buns or sandwiches, to beguile the tedium of waiting.

A few of the more prosperous ones made excursions to a neighbouring hostelry, and returned after partaking of alcoholic refreshment.

Salmon's business was conducted on entirely different lines. He had no groups of waiting clients ; as a rule

he was only to be seen by appointment. The waiting-room had only one occupant, a stout middle-aged woman, once a star of the first magnitude, a little fallen now from her high estate but still earning her fifty pounds a week on account of her past reputation. Claudia recognised her at once—the celebrated Lottie Lavigne, still boasting a great vogue in the suburbs and the provinces.

Claudia nervously proffered her cards to a well-dressed youth, who seemed to act as master of the ceremonies.

The young man was courtesy itself. He pointed to the stout lady. "Miss Lavigne is before you, miss, but she has an appointment. I don't suppose you will be kept waiting for very long. Please take a seat. I will take in your card to Mr. Salmon at once. Have you an appointment?"

"Not quite," replied Claudia, in a very small voice. "But I think he will see me. I have an introduction from Mr. Lewis Levi."

The young man disappeared into the inner room. Miss Lavigne, who was of the old type of genial hail-fellow-well-met artist, smiled pleasantly at the newcomer.

"Know old Lewis Levi, do you?" she inquired. "Not a bad sort of chap, when you get on the right side of him. Haven't met him for years; we used to be very good pals once. He can push people if he likes, too. Has he taken you up?—excuse the question."

Before Claudia could frame an answer, the well-dressed youth appeared, and signalled to Miss Lavigne. "Mr. Salmon will see you now, miss."

The once great star rose, shook out her ample skirts, and went towards the private room.

" Ta-ta," she cried, in her loud, hearty tones. " The best of luck to you."

Claudia murmured something graceful, and composed herself to wait the great man's pleasure. Fifteen, twenty, twenty-five minutes passed, and she could hardly control her impatience. Then, as the clock on the mantelpiece struck the half-hour, a bell sounded in the inner room.

The well-dressed young man started up from his desk. " This way, if you please, miss. Mr. Salmon will see you." It was evident that Miss Lavigne had retired by another door.

Lewis Levi was resplendent, but he was only a pale replica of his friend. Salmon was attired in a frock coat that obviously had been cut in Bond Street, and he wore a white waistcoat of immaculate purity.

He was a splendidly built man of about fifty, over six feet in height. His head was as smooth as a billiard ball, his upper lip ornamented by a carefully cultivated moustache. His complexion was as rosy as a baby's and his teeth were dazzling. Claudia could not be quite certain whether or not they were false.

Altogether, the man had an overpowering personality, impressed upon you by his big frame, his handsome features, his broad gestures, his deep, rather guttural voice. On close inspection you detected the Hebrew, but at the first glance the characteristics were not at all obvious.

He stretched out his broad, firm hand, in which Claudia put her slender, tremulous palm.

"So good of you to come and see me, my dear. Sorry to have kept you waiting. But when Lottie Lavigne starts to talk—well, nothing will stop her but an earthquake, or perhaps a bomb."

He laughed loudly at his little joke. It was a weakness of his to laugh at his own wit. And his position generally ensured him appreciative auditors.

Claudia was still far from feeling at ease, and somehow, in spite of his almost boisterous geniality, she had not taken very kindly to Mr. Salmon. The admiration in his bold blue eyes was a trifle too pronounced, and he had squeezed her hand a little more warmly than she liked.

"Mr. Levi suggested I should come," she said falteringly. "He said that you heard my turn the other night." She did not look at him as she spoke; she could not quite meet that bold glance.

Mr. Salmon was married to a prominent music-hall artist, some twenty years his junior, whom he had boomed from fifty pounds a week to two hundred. And report said that it was a very happy marriage. But rumour also added that, although Salmon was a good husband as husbands go, he was possessed of a roving eye. Claudia's face burned a little as she wondered if it was owing to her good looks that she had been singled out by the influential agent.

It was easy for a less astute man than the big variety agent to guess the thoughts that had prompted that burning flush. His manner changed at once, the admiration died out of his eyes. He became the alert, brisk man of business. His geniality remained, but it was no longer tinged with a certain free-and-easy gallantry.

" Now, my dear, we will come to the point. You have your own agent, of course ? "

Claudia named him—a Mr. Villiers, whose offices were in a street abutting on the Strand. " You know him, I daresay ? " she queried.

Salmon never belittled his fellow-agents ; rivals he had none. " Not personally, only by repute. Quite a good man, and perfectly straight, but not, of course, in the way of big things. His connection lies with the small halls. We hardly touch that sort of business. Terms, the usual six months' notice, I suppose ? "

" Yes, six months on either side," was the girl's reply.

" Very fair, very fair indeed. You are one of his best clients, I take it ; most of his people are two or three pounders. I wonder he didn't tie you up for a longer period."

Claudia explained that she had secured her first engagements through introductions from her old Italian manager, and that she had only gone to Villiers when her position, such as it was, had been to a certain extent assured.

" Pity you didn't come to me at the start, my dear. You've been wasting your time."

Claudia was beginning to lose her shyness, now that Mr. Salmon had dropped the admiring pose. She laughed merrily.

" You know as well as I do that you would have politely shown me the door ; and, besides, I shouldn't have had the courage. When I saw Miss Lavigne here I felt my heart come into my mouth."

She was speaking with perfect sincerity, and she meant every word she said. But it was impossible for

the big man not to read into her words a great compliment to his unique position and, inferentially, to himself. He laughed delightedly.

" What a modest little mouse ! She thought I was an ogre who would eat her up for her presumption, did she ? Well, when you know me better, you'll find I'm only hard to the conceited and incapable. Talent has no warmer friend than myself. Well, with regard to our friend Villiers, we can settle about him presently. He can have his fees for the six months, anyway. I can come in after."

Claudia protested warmly. " Oh, but, Mr. Salmon, you must take your fees, too, if you are going to help me to better things."

The big man waved his hand airily, as if money was the last thing in the world that interested him.

" Plenty of time to talk about that. Now, I want to know something about your own ideas. You are not satisfied with your present position, eh ? "

Claudia expressed her feelings, as far as she was able, in her frank, impulsive way.

" I am not exactly discontented ; for what I am making is wealth compared to what I should earn in any other walk of life. My father is a poor man, a wood-carver ; he is poorly paid ; he could not keep me in idleness. But the money is not great, and England is an expensive country. Perhaps I spend too much upon myself, upon dress and amusement. Then, sometimes, one is out for a long time, and one must live on one's savings. And then "—her tones broke off as she alluded to the fear that had haunted her for so many months—" one day my voice may go."

Salmon nodded his head sympathetically. "Yes, I understand. There is always that skeleton in the cupboard of every artist—that the time may come, for any and several reasons, when the public doesn't want her. But, if you could have a real success, you would not play the simpleton, like so many of them. You Italians are a thrifty folk. You would put by for a rainy day, eh?"

She rallied from her momentary depression under his encouraging hints. She clasped her hands together with a movement of enthusiasm.

"Oh, but I dare not think of it, Mr. Salmon. If it were to come true, I promise you I will not act the fool—ah, no, I have been too well acquainted with real poverty for that. Perhaps I would spend a shade more on clothes, for a good appearance is much when you meet managers. And my dear father should have more comfort, and only work when it pleased him. The rest I should save for the rainy days, when engagements became fewer, or ceased altogether."

The agent spoke gravely and deliberately. "I see your pretty little head is screwed on the right way. Well, now to business. I heard you sing, and you have got a talent. It is not one that would make its way by itself; it is, perhaps, not quite robust enough."

Claudia shook her head sadly. "I have always feared that. It was just what my old manager, Signor Ferrari, was always telling me."

"It wants to be pushed. We agents who are in a big way of business can do the pushing part; we have the machinery all ready. When do you finish your London engagements?"

" In a month from now," was the answer.

" Good. Take no more from to-day. Give Villiers his six months' notice, and refer him to me for his commission. I will, if you are willing, fix you for a period of twelve months. If, at the end of that time, you are not satisfied with what I have done for you, you can go elsewhere. Is that a fair offer ? "

" Oh, more than fair," cried Claudia joyfully.

" Now, tell me," Salmon asked, " what is the highest price you are getting ? That would, of course, be at the Mikado."

Claudia named the modest sum which, modest as it was in the music-hall world, was wealth compared with what she could earn in any other calling.

" H'm, not so bad. Villiers has done better than I thought ; he must have screwed it out of them. Well, at the end of the month be prepared to start for Rome."

Claudia's eyes opened to their fullest extent. " For Rome," she repeated in a wondering voice. The wily Salmon waited a few seconds before he resumed. He was about to play his trump card.

" Yes, I shall send you there for a few weeks, and then on to Paris. Then I shall bring you back with a foreign boom on you, and plant you in the big halls here. How do you like the programme, eh ? Good, is it not ? "

But she could not speak, only sit with her hands clasped together, hanging on his words.

He was pleased with the impression he had produced upon the impulsive and emotional Southern girl. He laughed genially.

" You see, we men in a big line can do something

when we set to work. Come to me about the same time to-morrow morning and I will give you an engagement for the Salone Margherita at four times the salary you are getting now."

He had played his trump card, and Claudia's head reeled at the great news. The Salone Margherita, the principal music-hall in Rome! And four times the salary!

What would they all say—the dear Beppo, the faithful Maudie? What would old Ferrari think—Ferrari who had told her she would never get beyond mediocrity?

She rose, and held out her hand, her beautiful eyes misty. "I cannot thank you properly now," she said in a trembling voice. "Everything seems whirling in my brain; I cannot put words together. To-morrow I will tell you how grateful I am, how hard I will work to repay your belief in me."

Salmon patted her hand softly. "I am sure you will be a good little girl and do me credit. Good-bye till to-morrow."

Still in a state of bewilderment, she went out by the side door and gained the street. She could not believe it was true yet. The Salone Margherita at four times the price! Why, she would have sung there cheerfully for nothing for the *cachet* it would confer.

She went to the nearest telephone call-office and rang up her friend Miss Farrell, who shared rooms with a sister artist in Camden Town.

"I have such glorious news," she told her: "Meet me at Luigi's for lunch in an hour's time. I am so excited, I shall go off my head if I don't talk to somebody."

And Maudie promised to be there. She was excited, too, by the cryptic message.

Claudia reached the restaurant a good half-hour before her friend. Obtaining ink and paper from the waiter, she wrote a letter, and went out and posted it. It was addressed to Charles Laidlaw, Esquire, Eaton Place. It was a brief epistle, and in it she related her wonderful adventures of the morning.

It was getting on for the luncheon hour when Mr. Lewis Levi strolled into the offices in Green Street.

"Governor in?" he inquired of the young man who officiated in the waiting-room.

"In, and alone, Mr. Levi. Walk in, please."

Levi opened the door of the private room and nodded to his friend.

"You have seen the Red Ragazza, as they call her?"

"Yes, she came pretty early. I have settled it all with her. She is in the seventh heaven of bliss, and doesn't know, for the moment, if she is on her head or her heels. And she's bursting with gratitude."

"A charming girl, and more than ordinarily pretty, don't you think?" questioned Levi.

"Yes, I quite agree. I should have enjoyed a little flirtation with her, but she doesn't seem that sort at all."

"No, from all I hear, she's considered a bit prudish. Until lately, was never seen about except with girl friends."

"When she lights up, she's deucedly handsome," said Salmon, in a musing tone. "I am not sure, from a professional point of view, she will turn out such a bad spec. When she gets into really good places, she

ought to take with the stalls. By the way, have you heard how the Laidlaw affair is going? "

"Running very strong, I am told. He is always taking her out to lunch and supper. He is very careful of her, too; always sees her home at night, and hands her to the safe care of her old father."

"I suppose he means to marry her, when he has sufficiently weighed up the pros and cons?" suggested Salmon.

"It seems to be the general impression that he is out for marriage. He's not at all the ordinary sort of fast young chap about town. Very high-minded, artistic, and unconventional. His grandfather took a wife from the stage."

Salmon smiled. "The stage is a bit different though from the music-hall, isn't it? Still, love carries some chaps far."

He rose and reached for his hat. "Let's stroll round to the club; it's time for an appetiser. Well, they'll have a fine chance of billing and cooing in the Eternal City. On the whole, I don't think I've done a bad day's work."

CHAPTER IV

REVEALS THE SPIDER

"YOU are down early for you, Mr. Charles. Sir Francis left half an hour ago. I was to tell you he was dining out to-night."

"Thanks, Pritchard. I shan't be home either. By Jove, what a heavy post!"

The speaker was Charles Laidlaw, a handsome, distinguished-looking young man of about twenty-seven. Pritchard, a stately old man with a thick mane of grey hair, was Sir Francis Laidlaw's butler. He had entered his master's service thirty years ago on his marriage, and was regarded with affection by every member of the small family.

Sir Francis—or, to give him his correct title, the Honourable Sir Francis Laidlaw—had been a widower for over twenty years. He had two daughters, Emily and Eva, both unmarried, and one son. He occupied an important position in the Foreign Office. Charles was a Secretary at the Embassy in Rome, and home for a short space on leave.

The Laidlaws were an old family, well rooted in the soil, the present Earl of Densleigh, Sir Francis's brother, being the seventh earl. They had not distinguished themselves greatly, being of the mediocre type

that furnishes model landlords, respectable legislators, fulfilling the duties and obligations of their station with quiet and unostentatious dignity. They had never produced a brilliant statesman or a great general. And they were eminently respectable.

The family had only once exhibited a freak, in the person of the sixth earl, Charles Laidlaw's grandfather. This gentleman, who inherited the title during his minority, showed unusual tendencies on coming of age. He left his estates to the care of his agent and his lawyers, and rarely entered the House of Peers, even to record a vote. He gambled and raced in an obtrusive fashion unknown to his decorous ancestors. His respectable relatives shook their heads over him, and regretted that the title had not come to his younger brother, who was a typical Laidlaw, with the charming manners which distinguished the family, but, behind all his geniality, cautious, level-headed, and discreet.

This eccentric nobleman put the crown upon his various misdemeanours by choosing a bride from the stage, he who could have married amongst the noblest in the land. His friends and relatives held up their hands in horror, and wondered whence he could have derived his freakish temperament. At that time the stage had not begun its invasion of the peerage ; such misalliances were few and far between.

The young countess was not only a very virtuous woman, but also a very charming one. And, in time, she wore down prejudice, and in the end was regarded with affection by those who had, at first, given her the cold shoulder. She bore her husband four children, all of whom took after their respectable, decorous

ancestors, bearing little or no resemblance to their freakish father and Bohemian mother.

Sir Francis, her youngest son, was a model Laidlaw, charming and suave, but prim, precise, without an original or unconventional idea, cut out according to the stereotyped Densleigh pattern, painstaking and mediocre. He married a woman who was his exact counterpart, and enjoyed domestic felicity of the placid sort till her death.

The two girls, Emily and Eva, were good-looking, straightforward, honest young women, possessed of a large fund of sound common sense, but destitute of wit, humour, or brilliancy.

Charles harked back to the freakish sixth earl and his Bohemian wife. The father was grave and cautious ; the son was impetuous and a little mercurial. In many ways he was an odd young man.

He liked the society of artists, musicians, and actors. He was not careful with money like the rest of his family. In fact, to tell the truth, he was inclined to extravagance, and frequently overstepped the limits of his modest income, derived from his pay and the interest of a small fortune left him by a distant female relative, who had loved him for his good looks and his delightful manners.

On this particular morning he sat down to breakfast in the handsome dining-room of the fine house in Eaton Place in a somewhat depressed frame of mind. He had an uneasy recollection of having lost a hundred at cards last night at his club, and the cheque for that amount which he had given had reduced his bank balance to very slender proportions. It would be some time before

further supplies would come in, and he knew Sir Francis, who was rigid in money matters, would not advance him a penny. In his suave, unemotional way, he would read him a severe lecture, that was all.

Leisurely he opened and perused his correspondence. It did not tend to improve his spirits. There were half a dozen applications from tradesmen demanding their little accounts. The sum total was quite a respectable one. And he thought gloomily of the paltry balance lying at his bank.

But he was never depressed for long. "There's only one way out of it," he sighed, when he had finished his review of the situation. "Old Aaronbaum must come to the rescue again, the oily old Jew. And, after that, strict retrenchment for the next twelve months. What a fool I was to play last night! Why didn't I stop in time? It isn't as if gambling were a weakness of mine."

He came to the last letter in the pile, and his eyes brightened. He recognised the big, rather sprawling handwriting of his latest friend, Claudia Erba, the charming girl who sang those dainty love-songs in her small but sympathetic voice.

"My very dear Friend,—I have great and glorious news, and you are the first to whom I tell them after my dear papa and my darling Maudie Farrell. You mix so much in our world that you must know of Salmon, the big variety agent who has all the 'stars' on his list. Well, it seems he heard me sing the other night and was impressed. He has sent for me through a friend, and he is going to help me to

a career. He will send me first abroad to Rome and Paris, work me up there, and then get me on to big halls in London. I go first to Rome. That will be delightful, because you will be there. I long to see you and talk it all over. Arrange that we meet soon.

" Yours, in the seventh heaven,

" CLAUDIA ERBA."

He was an impulsive and a sentimental young man, and he pressed the daintily scented little note to his lips.

" Darling little Claudia," he murmured rapturously. " What a dear she is ! I hope it will all turn out as she thinks. I suppose Salmon wouldn't buoy her up with false hopes. Her voice is too small, I should say, for big things, but she certainly has talent. I must take her to dinner. I seem to have known her all my life, and yet we only met a month ago."

He thought of that first night when he had sat beside her at a very Bohemian party at the Trocadero, and how she had charmed him with her bright, unaffected talk. How pretty and dainty she was, with those expressive eyes, that rosebud of a mouth closing over pearly teeth, and that wonderful wealth of hair of the Titian hue, which had gained her the name of " The Red Ragazza."

A month had gone by, and they had seen much of each other. He had taken her to lunch and dinner several times, now with her friend, Miss Farrell, now without. He had driven her home and made the acquaintance of the good Papa Beppo, and conversed

with that amiable old man in fluent Italian. Twice he had kissed her good night when she had seen him to the door of the dingy house in Percy Road, and she had kissed him back. And Claudia's kisses were a foretaste of Paradise.

He realised afresh, this emotional and artistic young man, how very dear Claudia had become to him during those few weeks ; in short, the only woman in the world.

They had drifted into love, with very little said on either side. It was understood tacitly that each had the first call on the society of the other, and that in consequence of that understanding any previous engagement should be cancelled.

With her ardent Southern nature, Claudia asked little more except to be loved by her " Carlo mio," as she called him. He, of course, saw the difficulties ahead more clearly than she did.

He recognised the prejudice of caste. If he took a third-rate music-hall artist for his wife he would affront the present generation as much as his grandfather had done two generations back.

He was a clean-minded young fellow, without a touch of the libertine in him. He knew there were only two alternatives open to him : to marry her or leave her. The latter was impossible.

And now there were prospects of her becoming a " star." Well, that would make things easier, and the world had shed a great deal of prejudice since the days of his grandfather.

" It is a red-letter day in her life ; it must be celebrated." he thought joyfully to himself. Then, a

moment later, he remembered the slenderness of his bank balance. He must send her a gift she would remember through all the long years to come. Decidedly, the only man who could help him was the genial old Jew, Aaronbaum, who charged you stiffly, but always lent with a good grace.

Claudia should have her gift, the souvenir of this turning-point in her life, if he had to repent, from a financial point of view, in sackcloth and ashes for the rest of his life.

An hour later he was shown into the private sanctum of Mr. Aaronbaum, a money lender of the effusive, oleaginous type.

The little man with the bald head, the dyed side-whiskers, rose briskly. He radiated geniality, stretching forward his fat paw.

" Delighted to see you, Mr. Laidlaw. I thought you had forgotten me altogether."

" We never forget our friends, Aaronbaum," replied Laidlaw with his easy humour. The Jewish gentleman was destitute of that priceless attribute. He never knew when you were laughing at him.

" Friend, you say ? " queried the financier, a smile playing over his coarse features. " Well, sir, you never spoke a truer word. Who is the friend in need ? Why, one Jacob Aaronbaum. You curse me when you pay, because my interest is a little bit stiff. But why do you come to me, eh ? Because you have no security, and your bank that lends at five or six per cent. won't trust you without. You have not got that security, and you come to old Jacob, who takes your word, and treats you like a gentleman, eh ? "

The little fat creature shrugged his shoulders and regarded his visitor with an air of innocence, almost virtue.

Laidlaw deposited himself in an easy chair, and pulled out his cigarette case.

The moneylender raised a protesting hand. "Excuse me, sir, not a cigarette. One of these. The best cigars on the market; cost me a hundred and eighty shillings a box." He held out a box towards his visitor.

Laidlaw picked out one in his easy, nonchalant manner. "You wouldn't pay that if they were not worth double the price, I know, old friend Jacob. I shall find it A1."

The Jew bustled about and dived into a small cupboard, from which he produced a bottle of champagne, which he rapidly uncorked.

"Smoking makes one thirsty," he observed. "A glass of 'bubbly,' Mr. Laidlaw. I take it you have come to talk business, not only to inquire after poor old Jacob's health, eh?"

Laidlaw accepted the proffered glass, and drained it to his host's health.

"You're a wonderful chap, Jacob. If you had been caught very young, you might have developed into quite a decent member of society, been content with five per cent. instead of two hundred and fifty. But, anyway, you are the soul of hospitality, and you know how to make friends of your clients. If you do skin us, you do it in the most agreeable fashion; it is almost painless."

Mr. Aaronbaum looked a little hurt. That reference to "skinning" offended his finer feelings

"No security," he murmured in a low voice.

"Well, to come to the point, Jacob. I've got a clean slate, haven't I, so far as you are concerned?"

The moneylender was all smiles. Men of his profession specialise on two classes of clients—the wasters who have not a penny of their own, but have rich families at their back who pay up; the extravagant men who are in secure positions, and contrive, for fear of scandal, to meet their obligations by hook or crook. His unerring instinct had led him to regard Charles Laidlaw as a safe client.

"Not a penny, sir, are you in my debt. By the way, I've got that old insurance policy. You might as well have it."

"Keep it, Jacob, keep it; it may come in handy yet," said Laidlaw in his easy way.

The Jew's eyes glistened. "You want a little bit of ready, eh?"

"You're a thought-reader, my friend. Yes, a little bit of ready. I should like it on easier terms than the last, by the way. You have rivals in this line, you know."

Mr. Aaronbaum shifted uneasily in his chair. He poured out another glass of champagne for the two. He knew that a rival firm had been spreading circulars broadcast, offering to lend money for next to nothing. It was painful to think such a crude organisation should catch the unwary.

"Have a care, Mr. Laidlaw, have a care. Don't walk into traps. They suggest less interest, but they can get you in the end. They run it up, sir, with negotiation fees and all sorts of extra charges—you'll pay a devilish sight more in the end."

"How much per cent., Jacob?" inquired Laidlaw, in his nonchalant fashion.

"How much do you want?" inquired the wary Mr. Aaronbaum, before committing himself to terms.

Laidlaw hesitated a moment before he answered. "I think I shall want a clear four hundred. Nothing in kind, you know. No cigars or sherry as makeshift."

The Jew indulged in a soft whistle. "It's big money, Mr. Laidlaw. Three hundred is the most you have asked me before. Excuse me, but it seems to me you're getting a bit deeper, eh?"

Laidlaw laughed his easy laugh. "That's evident, Jacob, even to the most infantile intelligence. But, to let you into a secret, the extra two hundred is for a special purpose; the extravagance will not be repeated."

The Jew looked at him; his glance was almost benevolent. "I know the world; I know young men," he said solemnly. "The extra two hundred is wanted for a woman. I have, in my younger days, been guilty of a similar indiscretion."

Laidlaw laughed heartily. "You are a most discerning and sympathetic Jacob. Yes, the two hundred is intended for a present to a lady, a most beautiful lady. Tack it on to the other. What rate?"

"I would prefer a loan of three hundred," murmured the usurer feebly, as he filled up the glasses, and pulled, in a meditative fashion, at his cigar.

Laidlaw was firm. "Four hundred or nothing. Hesitate, and you are lost. I will go to your advertising rivals."

This threat settled Mr. Aaronbaum. He gave in, still protesting.

"Three hundred should be the limit, but you are a man of honour, and have always met your obligations. Still, you understand, there is no security, except the life policy, which is something, but not much. And you are so much in love with a woman that you are going to spend two hundred pounds upon her. *Mein Gott*, if I did not think you were a man of brains I should say this was the first step to ruin."

"Perhaps to salvation," said Laidlaw softly.

The Jew looked up at him, his little, beady eyes twinkling with a softer expression.

"A good woman, eh? You've too much sense to chuck away your money on a harpy. Well, sir, you shall have the four hundred in notes, repayable in twelve months at fifty per cent. You understand, there is no security, only your income and the life policy. If you go bankrupt, where shall *I* be?" He ended on a pathetic note.

"If I go bankrupt, you'll lose, without a doubt," replied Laidlaw laconically. "You'll have to get it out of the chaps out of whom you make two hundred and fifty per cent."

Mr. Aaronbaum shrugged his fat shoulders. "You are not a man of business."

"Only what is humorously called a diplomatist," interjected Laidlaw.

"Which means, that you get the better of us poor, stupid business men, eh?"

"Sometimes. Never at the finish. Weight and experience tell in the financial ring."

The usurer counted out the notes, which the young man put in his pocket-book.

Laidlaw held out his hand. "*Au revoir*, good old Jacob. Always true to your motto, 'Cash, while you wait.' Well, some day I shall turn into a business man myself, and lend money instead of borrowing it. We might become partners then; what do you think?"

The moneylender looked at him very kindly. "Never, Mr. Laidlaw. If you became rich to-morrow, you would never be a business man. You would lend money to your friends without interest, and you would die poor at the finish."

"By Jove, I believe you are right. Well, good-bye."

Aaronbaum laid a detaining hand on his arm. "Good-bye, Mr. Laidlaw. Excuse what I am going to say, but I'm old enough to be your father, and I've been through it all. Don't get entangled with a woman."

Laidlaw laughed back at him joyously. "Not if the woman was the sweetest, the kindest, the most gentle-hearted in the world, absolutely pure and free from guile?"

The veteran shook his head. "Such a paragon doesn't exist, except in a young man's fancy. Wife, maid, or widow, they're only middling when they're good, and devilish bad when they are bad. Take my word for it, Mr. Laidlaw."

"What a compliment to Mrs. Aaronbaum! Well, again good-bye, old cynic."

With the four hundred pounds in his pocket, Laidlaw made his way to one of the most expensive shops in Bond Street. The day before he had seen a diamond

ring marked at a hundred and eighty pounds. It would just suit Claudia's delicate hand.

His family did not know of the relations between them ; Papa Beppo, the old wood-carver, smiled and said nothing. He must send it to the Mikado music-hall, an insignificant place of entertainment in the East End, where she appeared nightly, and with it he sent a little note :

" DARLING CLAUDIA,—Wear this sometimes, always, if you can. A pledge of my love.

" Yours devotedly.

" CHARLES."

Claudia received the precious gift, and went into ecstasies. She saw her friend, Maudie Farrell, that night, and showed her the splendid gift.

" Is he not a darling, my Carlo ? " she cried enthusiastically to her friend.

And Maudie Farrell agreed. Privately, she sighed a little, to think that such a generous lover had not come her way.

CHAPTER V

A MYSTERIOUS CARD

"DO you think, Zélie, just one more touch of rouge—eh? I want to look my best to-night." Zélie, the French maid, applied just the one more dab with the hare's foot to her mistress's cheeks, then drew back and surveyed her handiwork with pardonable pride.

"It is perfect. Madame could not possibly be made to look more charming," she pronounced, with an air of conviction.

Miss Zerbstein, the daughter of a naturalised German, herself a full-fledged British subject, indulged in a smile of satisfaction, and went into the dining-room of her handsome flat in Magenta Gardens, Chelsea, to see that everything was in readiness for the evening's entertainment.

Yes, the table was all ready, laid for fifteen. Williams, the hired waiter, who officiated on these festive occasions, hovered about, critical and assiduous. He removed a vase of flowers an inch lower, patted the spoons and forks into more regular position, and occasionally readjusted the wine glasses. He was an artist in the matter of service, and he wished the whole picture to consist of harmoniously blended details.

Miss Zerbstein cast a rapid glance around. "Excellent, Williams, as it is sure to be when you have the management. Supper at twelve o'clock sharp. I wait for nobody."

Williams bowed. Miss Zerbstein was a lady he respected and admired ; she always rewarded intelligent service with a liberal hand. He had also seen her act, and experienced thrills in the process.

For the big, majestic woman, verging on forty but made up to look thirty in the limelight, was a great "sketch" artist. A clever young man wrote her short, pungent dramas which suited her peculiar histrionic powers. Hers was a popular and highly-paid turn at all the suburban halls.

Many years ago, before she became a "star," Miss Zerbstein had possessed a husband, a young man who played the trombone, and whom she had picked out of a provincial orchestra. Inflated with his subsequent prosperity, he had taken to drink and idleness. A third attack of delirium tremens had finished him off, and his widow never essayed again the perilous path of matrimony.

She led, on the whole, a very happy life. She made plenty of money, she dressed well, and entertained generously. But at the end of the year she always finished up on the right side. She had several thousands put by in snug investments. For the last ten years of her career she had been earning big money.

She went back into her cosy drawing-room and awaited the arrival of her guests. It was a quarter past eleven. They were, nearly all, members of the same profession, and would not get here much before

half-past. She herself was "resting" for a couple of weeks.

The first visitor to arrive was a compatriot, a tall, thin man with spectacles, the *chef-d'orchestre* of a minor music-hall. He was also a naturalised German, but had thought it politic to exchange his Teutonic patronymic for the high-standing English name of Howard.

They were old friends. Truda Zerbstein held out her hand with a welcoming smile.

"Always punctual," she said pleasantly. "I am glad to see the old faces again. A week out of harness is enough for me. After that I long to smell the footlights again."

Mr. Howard grunted. "That is so, I quite understand. You get applause every five minutes; you make big money. Me, the poor devil of a conductor, beating time to the same old music—and, *Himmel*! what music! —I do not think I love the footlights overmuch."

"But you are doing better now, my friend, surely," suggested his hostess with a sly smile.

The conductor was evidently a man whom Melancholy had marked for her own. He did not rally under Miss Zerbstein's brightening glance. He emitted a deeper groan.

"It is something, I admit, better than nothing, but still very inadequate," he said gloomily.

There was a pause. She was very fond of this morose man; they had been fast friends for years; but he was not a cheerful companion at the best of times. She hastened to change the conversation.

"Lewis Levi is coming to-night, and bringing with

him his new little *protégée*, Claudia Erba, the girl with the beautiful Titian hair. You have heard he and Salmon are going to push her ?—of course, to their own advantage."

The ungenial Howard emitted a snort. " Yes, I have heard it. Why should they go out of their way to choose her ? They could have chosen from a dozen others more suitable."

" They don't often make mistakes, you must admit that," suggested Miss Zerbstein quietly.

" But she is no good, from the stage point of view," cried Howard angrily. " A thin little pipe of a voice, just enough to get over the orchestra. We have had her at our show : does for a first or last turn, that is all. Now, if they had taken my sister, there she was ready to their hand."

So that was the reason of his animosity ! Poor Howard was evidently unconscious of the fact that his sister, in addition to the fact of being an indifferent artist, was undeniably plain.

" I have never seen her myself," said Miss Zerbstein, who had her full share of feminine malice, " but Levi tells me she is remarkably handsome."

But her old friend was not to be placated.

" I can see no beauty in the little Italian chit," he growled fiercely. " I hate that shade of hair."

Just at that moment the door opened to admit two guests—Mr. McGrudock, one of a pair of popular cross-talkers who nightly convulsed their audiences, and pretty little Estelle Raby, who had a turn combining some very artistic playing on the piano with catchy and topical ditties.

After their advent the arrivals were fast—a celebrated juggler, a male sketch artist, a musician who performed on several instruments, one after the other, with amazing skill—a celebrated light comedian, a daring trick cyclist, a violinist who had failed on the concert platform, but found an appreciative audience at the halls.

It was five minutes to twelve. Ten of the fourteen guests had arrived. The non-arrivals included Levi and Claudia Erba, Salmon and his young wife.

On the stroke of the clock, Levi, resplendent in evening attire, brought Claudia Erba, looking very beautiful, with flushed cheeks and sparkling eyes. Miss Zerbstein received her with a cordiality that was almost gushing.

" So pleased to see you, my dear. I know we shall be great friends. I have heard so much about you from our friend Mr. Levi."

Claudia murmured something graceful and pretty, in her perfect English that hardly showed the trace of a foreign accent. She was introduced to the other guests—all " stars," with the exception of the Teutonic Howard. She had never said good-day to any one of them before, but she knew them all by sight.

It was at Levi's instigation that she had come to this party. He had told her that, in view of her altered prospects, she ought to become acquainted with the more prosperous members of her profession.

She had, of course, been to supper gatherings before, but they were humble affairs given by people who appeared at the beginning and end of the programmes, not " star " turns.

She had consulted Laidlaw as to her acceptance, and at first he had demurred. But on seeing she was eager to go, he had given in. Truth to tell, while he loved the stage, he was not enamoured of the music-hall. Claudia was, of course, a brilliant exception.

Williams hovered in the background. As soon as the introductions had been effected, he announced in his deep, waiter-like tone, " Supper is served."

Miss Zerbstein hesitated for a moment. The soul of punctuality herself, she resented the lack of it in others. But Salmon and his wife, the lady who was drawing two hundred a week, were very important people. Besides, he was her agent.

" Another five minutes, please, Williams." She would give them that, and no more. Mrs. Salmon was always late ; she was the despair of managers.

But they arrived before the five minutes were up : Salmon, a fine figure of a man in faultless evening clothes, but overdone with flashing diamond studs ; his wife, *petite*, dainty, and pretty, with a charming manner and a silvery voice, a typical Queen of the Music Hall.

Mrs. Salmon led the way with Lewis Levi. Claudia fell to the violinist. Miss Zerbstein sailed majestically in the rear on the arm of her agent.

It was an excellent supper. Soup, cold salmon, lobster mayonnaise, cold ducks and chickens, quails in aspic, fairy-like sweets. Champagne flowed like water.

Williams waited with the ease of long practice and intelligent anticipation of all wants. Zélie, equally adept at dressing hair, laying on the right quantity of

rouge, and handing plates, was a deft and valuable assistant.

Claudia was delighted. Abstemious daughter of the South, she drank sparingly, but the heady wine mounted swiftly to her brain, and made her chatter and laugh like the others. And the violinist, her supper partner, was an amusing fellow, who convulsed her with his sallies.

When the supper was over they adjourned to the drawing-room, and, after the manner of all true professionals, had an entertainment on their own. Miss Zerbstein gave an impassioned recital. Estelle Raby did one of her well-known piano pieces. The violinist played exquisitely a nocturne of Chopin's, to the accompaniment of the gloomy Teuton, re-named Howard.

Claudia, after much pressing, followed on with one of her pretty little songs. When she had finished, Salmon and Levi led the applause vigorously, followed by all the merry band, with the sole exception of Howard, who could not forgive her her Titian locks and her good looks.

It was time to break up. Salmon had presented Claudia to his young wife, who had greeted her kindly. Miss Zerbstein impressed a warm kiss on her fair cheek.

"Come and see me as soon as you return, my dear. I know we shall be great friends," she said. Claudia promised that she would; she thought her hostess charming. She hated people of Austrian extraction, but she had no particular objection to Germans.

Levi's big Rolls-Royce was waiting at the door. He swept his charge into it. He had been to hundreds

of this kind of entertainment, and he had been a little bored.

But Claudia's joyous face made him smile, in spite of the fact that he was both bored and sleepy.

"Enjoyed yourself, little girl?" he asked kindly. His tone was quite fatherly; he was not an elderly Lothario, like his big friend Salmon.

Claudia laughed joyously. "Oh, it was delicious. I have never been to such a party before. My, what a splendid supper! How rich Miss Zerbstein must be."

"A hundred a week clear, after she has paid her cast," replied Levi, who knew the income of every artist on the music-hall stage. "Some day you will give parties, too, when your income grows as big as hers, eh?"

Claudia reflected. "No, I do not think I would quite spend my money like that on all and sundry. To you and Mr. Salmon I would give a party, out of love and gratitude. You understand."

Yes, Levi intimated that he understood. Still, Miss Zerbstein got pleasure out of her hospitality.

"One must pay for what amuses you," he said, with a shrug of his shoulders.

Claudia looked compassionately at the world-worn, weary man, his features sharpened by fatigue and weariness.

"Ah, you are older. You have learned and suffered," she said, with her swift comprehension.

Mr. Levi dozed during the drive. He woke with a start as the car drew up with a jerk at the humble tenement in Percy Road, Brixton. Still half-asleep,

he tumbled out, and assisted his fair companion to alight.

"You have your key, little girl? Good! Now, one word before we part. When you come back, cultivate Miss Zerbstein; I see she has taken a great fancy to you. She knows everybody; she can help you; she is in the swim. Good night. All kind wishes to the dear papa. I think I see his light. He is waiting up for his little pearl. Once again, good night."

Claudia disappeared in the doorway, and Lewis Levi drove on to his mansion at Tulse Hill, well pleased that Miss Zerbstein and his new *protégée* had got on so well together. It was some compensation for a boring evening.

A week later Claudia's last London engagement was terminated. Mr. Villiers settled up with her for the amount due, and expressed his regret at losing so pleasant a client. He was a bit puzzled as to the reasons which had induced Salmon to take her up, but, being fully aware of the great man's susceptibility to beauty, he put it down to her good looks.

In three days she would start for Rome, with a completely new wardrobe and a maid, an Italian girl whom she had known and befriended in London. She had demurred to the extra expense at first. What did she, the daughter of Beppo Erba, the humble wood-carver, want with an attendant?

But Salmon had insisted on it. Her altered prospects, he assured her, not only justified, but demanded, additional outlay.

"To be poor is bad enough, but to look poor is the height of folly. It is only well-known millionaires who

can afford to give an impression of shabbiness. The world that is of any use to you takes you, as often as not, at your own valuation," he had told her in that loud, authoritative way of his that silenced opposition.

He had been very generous, offering to hand her a considerable portion of her salary in advance if she needed it. But Claudia, thanks to her ingrained habits of frugality, was able to decline. She had put by a tidy little sum during the last twelve months, and Beppo, who was economy itself, had been in constant employment, and had refused to take a penny from her during the period. For an Italian girl of her class she was well off.

She spent some anxious hours at the various shops, making herself smart in order to please this new agent, who demanded from his clients a certain standard of apparent prosperity. Being a born bargainer, like most of her countrywomen, and an adept at finding out the cheapest market, she made a brave show on about half the amount it would have cost the average English girl in the same position.

She went to say good-bye to Salmon on the day before her journey and to take his last instructions, if there were any to be given. Mr. Levi, her other benevolent genius, had given her a farewell luncheon, in the company of Maudie Farrell, at Luigi's. The girls had partaken of their favourite dishes and drank Asti Spumante.

Mr. Salmon received her with great cordiality and good humour, and was as fatherly and detached as Levi himself. She was beginning to feel quite at ease with him now. He had found that the role of the

elderly admirer did not pay with a girl of her temperament. Besides, she was too much engrossed with Laidlaw.

" No, my dear, I have nothing else to tell you," he said, in answer to her question as to final instructions. " Work hard, and have confidence in yourself."

For a second her face paled, and she clasped her hands tragically. " Oh, if I should fail ! "

" You won't fail if you keep control of your nerves," cried Salmon in his bluff, heartening way. " I have not been idle the last week or two. I have made the way pretty clear for you. Do just as well at the Salone Margherita as you've done at the Mikado, and you'll find the result very different."

" You make me feel very brave," she told him, and she spoke with all sincerity. " I shall think of those words when I first step on the stage of the Margherita."

" And when will you be seeing Mr. Laidlaw in Rome ? " asked Salmon after a pause.

She blushed as she faltered that he was going back to the Embassy just a week later.

Salmon laughed as he noted her confusion. " And there is nobody you would sooner meet there, eh ? I suppose you wonder how I know that he is a great friend of yours. Well, our friend Levi, who picks up all the gossip, told me that he had seen you together a lot."

She was rather surprised to find that their acquaintance was such common property ; they had generally chosen out-of-the-way places for their meetings. But she made no comment, and Salmon dropped the subject.

She rose, and held out her hand, feeling that she had

stayed long enough. She knew there was a minor "star" awaiting his leisure in the reception-room. But he detained her.

"Just a moment, little girl." The great variety agent scribbled a few cabalistic words upon a plain visiting-card, and handed it to her. "Can you read them?"

"I can make out the letters, but I don't understand the words."

He laughed easily. "That doesn't matter in the least; they are a little code of my own."

She looked puzzled, and his manner became grave.

"You are going into a country that you know well, of course, but one can never tell what may happen. And you will only have one real friend there, Mr. Laidlaw. Now, if any unforeseen trouble or difficulty should arise, send an advertisement to one of the Rome morning papers with those words."

"But why?" she asked, growing more puzzled at his grave and mysterious demeanour.

He spoke a little impatiently. "Please do not inquire, my dear signorina. Only keep a still tongue and do as I request you, should occasion arise." He proceeded in a more equable tone: "It will always pay you, and pay you well, to do what I suggest. If you do that, I can promise you that you will become one of the most popular artists of the day. As you well know, I can make or break you."

A frightened look came into her dark eyes as he uttered the last words. He hastened to reassure her.

"But do not let us talk of that. My object, as you can guess, is the former, not the latter."

She shrank a little from him, and he leaned forward with an ingratiating smile. Was there something hard and sinister in the man that she had failed to suspect till now?

"Further," went on the agent, in his smooth, level tones, "there is a friend of mine in Rome who will act as your friend, if occasion arises that you want somebody on the spot; and it may arise; one never knows. If you want his assistance at any time you have only to insert this advertisement in the *Tribuna*, making an appointment to meet outside the chief post-office at noon. Address your advertisement to 'Gobbo' (hunchback). Th man you will meet will wear black kid gloves. Now, no more questions; we must say good-bye. Take care of that card."

She left the room with those mysterious instructions ringing in her ears. It was a beautiful, bright day, but there seemed a chill in the atmosphere as she walked along. She shivered a little as she murmured to herself: "But there could not be any trouble now. And yet how strange of him to suggest it!"

CHAPTER VI

THE FLOWER-SELLER

IT was the day before Claudia's departure for Italy. To-morrow afternoon she would start on her journey. Three people had arranged to see her off from the station—old Beppo, Maudie Farrell, and her lover, Charles Laidlaw.

It would be a party of strong contrasts: the old wood-carver, earning the wages of a working man, the fourth-rate artist, and the young aristocrat, slim and handsome. Claudia, as a coming "star," stood perhaps in a class by herself.

To-night was to be sacred to herself and her lover. He was to meet her at Victoria Station and take her on to dinner at the Ritz.

He had thought it all over seriously the last few days, and had made up his mind. Up to the present he had avoided going to places where he might meet people of his own world. But, having crossed the Rubicon in his own mind, he was no longer apprehensive of publicity.

The forthcoming separation, short though it would be, had brought home to him the fact that he loved Claudia Erba with his whole heart and soul—that she was essential to his happiness.

Impetuous and impulsive, as was his nature, he was not wholly destitute of worldly wisdom. He could gauge pretty closely the price he would have to pay for making her his wife.

His grandfather had flung convention to the winds, as he intended doing, and had lived down his misalliance. But the rich Earl of Densleigh, the owner of broad acres, was a very different person from the comparatively poor young man, on the threshold of his diplomatic career, with a few hundreds.

Was it such a big price after all? His tastes and sympathies all lay in the direction of Bohemianism. He would have to give up the diplomatic service, for which he had never felt any strong inclination. The women of his proper world would refuse to receive his wife, but he had never appreciated greatly the women of his own set, with their narrow notions of birth and caste. His family might refuse to speak to him; well, he had nothing in common with his father, less with his sisters.

Yes, Claudia, with her warm Southern temperament, would make up for all he was prepared to renounce. But he could not marry just yet. There was the shadow of his indebtedness to the Jew moneylender hanging over him. He must get clear of that; it would take him the best part of eighteen months. He would explain it all to Claudia to-night, and ask her to give her promise to wait for him.

He dressed early, and, when he had finished, strolled down into the hall. His father was standing there, with a somewhat unpleasant expression on his thin, aquiline features.

" I should like a few minutes' talk with you, Charles, if you will come into the library," he said curtly.

The young man followed, and, at a motion from the elder, seated himself. He could never remember, from the earliest days of childhood, that there had ever been the slightest sympathy between his father and himself. In later years, their intercourse had always been marked by a mutual restraint and reserve. Such a thing as interchange of confidence was unknown.

Sir Francis came to the point at once. " Certain rumours about you have reached me lately, and they are such as to cause me great uneasiness."

Charles expressed his regret in tones that were perfectly polite and respectful.

" I hear that for some weeks past you have been seen constantly in the society of a young Italian girl of obscure origin who earns her livelihood by appearing at music-halls of an inferior class."

It was put as offensively as it was possible to be put. Charles's face flushed a dull red, but his manner was still respectful.

" Your information is quite correct, sir. I rather take objection to some of the details of your description."

" What are your intentions ? " snapped Sir Francis.

Young Laidlaw was sorry that the interview was taking place on this particular night, the night sacred to the meeting of himself and his sweetheart. He had no intention of marrying yet, and he hated a scene, even of the decorous type, which men of cold-blooded temperament like his father are alone capable of provoking. It could reasonably have been deferred till

the last moment, when he would have avowed his determination to act for himself in the choice of a wife.

"You have a perfect right to ask, sir, and you have also a perfect right to feel annoyed at what must appear to you an act of inconceivable folly on my part."

Sir Francis looked up, with a momentary gleam of hope in his cold eyes. He had never understood his son, never been sure whether he possessed brains or not. The only thing he was at all sure of was his obstinacy, and that, no doubt, he had inherited from his grandfather, the man who married the actress. It was a favourable sign that Charles recognised that his infatuation would be described as folly by sensible people.

The next words undeceived him. "I should have had to tell you sooner or later, and I confess I would have preferred it to be later, for many reasons. One of them is that, although I have made up my mind to take a certain step, bound to meet with your disapproval, I shall not take it for some little time yet."

"That means," said Sir Francis, in his coldest and harshest voice, "that you intend to marry this girl when it suits you. I take it you have counted the cost?"

"Yes," answered the young man, in tones that were low and firm. "I have counted the cost, and I am ready to pay it when the time comes."

Sir Francis rose, his face white with anger. He felt the more angry that he was so powerless. The usual

lever that a parent can use in such cases was denied him. His son was independent, thanks to his small fortune.

"I shall not attempt to argue with you," he said, speaking with deadly calm. "I will just be content with defining my attitude. Till the day you marry this girl I shall make no alteration in our relations. Upon that day my door is closed to you and your wife, never to open again. You understand?"

Young Laidlaw's face went white at the threat, but he did not lose his self-control, nor abate the firmness of his bearing.

"I understand, sir. I am very sorry that you see fit to come to such a determination."

His father imperiously waved him to the door.

"I need not detain you any longer. One word more, and I shall not allude to the subject again. I see you are dining out to-night. Is it with her?"

Charles admitted that he was.

"And do you happen to be dining at the Ritz, by any chance?"

"Yes, I intended to dine there," was the answer.

"Then may I ask you to select some other place for this particular evening? Your sisters and I are dining there with my old friends, Lord and Lady Windlesham. You will understand that it would be very unpleasant for me to be asked questions."

For a moment Charles hesitated. Had not he and Claudia as much right to dine at the Ritz as the aristocratic Windleshams? Still, a moment's reflection caused him to admit that his father was justified in his objection.

If he chose to run counter to all the traditions of his birth and upbringing he could hardly expect his family to take it meekly.

"Certainly, sir," he said, after a pause. "I will select some other restaurant with pleasure. I am sure it will not matter to Claudia where we dine."

He left the room without another word, and the elder man muttered angrily to himself, "Quixotic idiot."

Their diplomatic training stood them in good stead in this respect—that it had enabled both to keep their tempers. But they were very sore with each other, Sir Francis at what he considered to be an act of crass folly, Charles at the contemptuous description of his sweetheart as a girl of obscure origin.

The two lovers met at Victoria Station in due course, the young man explaining his change of plans.

"We won't go to the Ritz, if you don't mind, darling. I've had a flare-up with the pater. He will be there to-night, and my presence would irritate him, no doubt, after what has happened. Shall we say the Trocadero? They do you very well there."

Claudia smiled and agreed. What did it matter where she dined so long as she was with her beloved? But she seemed very thoughtful as they drove along.

They got a table for two in the gallery, and, when they were seated and had given their orders to the waiter, she leaned across and whispered to him:

"You have quarrelled with your father; you have told me he is hard and unsympathetic. It is about me, is it not, Carlo mio?"

She always called him Carlo. His name sounded much nicer in her soft Italian, she thought.

Laidlaw could not hide his embarrassment as he answered her. "To tell the truth, it was, but don't let us think of it. We love each other, my Claudia, and that is enough for both of us."

A soft light came into her beautiful eyes. Shyly she stretched her hand across the table, heedless of onlookers, and laid it for a second on his.

"More than enough for me, now and ever. But will it always be enough for you, dearest? Your proud family cannot forgive me for being the daughter of a poor old wood-carver and singing on the music-hall stage. Well, the English perhaps are prouder than most, but it would be the same in every other country. It might be better for you never to see me again."

He smiled at her. "Would you like that, little one? Or, now that you are going to be a 'star,' have you in your eye the vision of some prosperous manager for your husband?"

He spoke jestingly, to rally her from her depression. He had no fears of her loyalty. She would sooner marry a poor man she loved than a rich man she could only tolerate.

"I shall never love anybody else," she said simply. "And if I do not marry you I shall die an old maid. But if you think best, Carlo, I will give you up, and live on my memories of these delightful weeks."

Had they been alone he would have taken her in his arms and kissed her, but he could not do that in a public place. Very earnestly and tenderly he told her how dearly he loved her, and how the world was nothing to him without her. He explained that for some little time—a year, perhaps a few months longer—he had to

adjust his financial affairs, so that he could begin his married life without a cloud.

" So we will not worry about fathers or relatives, or friends whose friendship is not worth having," he ended gaily. " We will make our own life, and find a new world if necessary. Will you wait for me, my Claudia, until then? "

The eyes that had grown misty with emotion brightened again ; her happy smile returned.

" Oh, Carlo mio, of course I will wait," she cried fervently. " I will wait longer now that I am sure you will not repent. Look, I have your dear ring on. I put it on every night when I go to my room, and remove it in the morning."

They spent a delightful time ; they found everything excellent, the dinner, and the music that spoke to them of love in its dreamy strains.

" Oh, it has been a glorious evening," she sighed, as they sat sipping their coffee and smoking cigarettes. " But, oh, dearest, it will be dull in Rome till you come to me. I shall mark off every day on my calendar."

" Only seven, my darling," he told her, as much in love with her as she with him.

She was up betimes in the morning, for there was much to see to, many instructions to leave with old Beppo. Her friend, Maudie Farrell, came round early to spend as long a time as possible with her before their parting.

" I wish you were coming with me," cried Claudia. " I am tremendously excited, and in a way hopeful, and Carlo will be there to cheer me in a few days. But behind it all I feel afraid."

"Afraid of what?" was Miss Farrell's answer. "Even if you don't turn out the success Salmon evidently anticipates, you will be better off. Your chances in London will be increased by your connection with the Salone Margherita."

Old Beppo was working in his little den at the top of the house; the two girls had the sitting-room to themselves.

Claudia looked round with frightened eyes, as if the walls had ears, and whispered in a hoarse voice:

"It is not of that I am thinking. It is all, as you say, to the good. But, darling, do you remember that terrible thing that happened last year?"

And then Miss Farrell understood, and her manner became grave too. "Yes, I remember. We were both very terrified at first, but it has blown over—what chance is there of its ever coming to light now? And besides, it did not happen to Claudia Erba, remember."

"I know, but that is little protection. I have been on the stage nightly for months. I might be recognised."

Her friend tried to soothe her. "It could be explained away, if there was necessity. But what has brought it into your mind now? It has gone from mine."

"I will tell you. I went to say good-bye to Salmon, and when I was leaving he spoke very strangely." Claudia repeated to her friend what the agent had said to her, and showed the card on which he had written those cabalistic words.

Miss Farrell was a sensible young woman, and saw things very quickly

"I do not wonder at your being frightened," she said, after she had considered for a few seconds. "It seems, at first, as if it could hardly be a coincidence. And yet it is absurd to think of any other explanation. How could he know, or guess?"

"It was only known to you and papa, outside those immediately concerned," said Claudia.

"You have never dropped a hint to anybody else—to Mr. Laidlaw, for example?"

Claudia shook her head vigorously. "Never. To Carlo the last of all people."

"And yet it might be wise to confide in him—to seek his advice."

But Claudia raised her hand in vigorous protest. "But it would be impossible. You English—pardon my frankness—are so high-minded, so punctilious, have such an exaggerated standard of personal honour. If he could understand, yes. But he would never understand. He could never be brought to believe I was not a consenting party."

"I am an Englishwoman, and I believe you. If Mr. Laidlaw did not believe you, he would be no true lover."

"You are a woman; you can read a woman," retorted Claudia swiftly. "Carlo is a man, with a man's limitations."

"But you will tell him some day, surely?" questioned the straightforward English girl.

Claudia shrugged her shoulders. "Yes, some day perhaps, when I am quite sure of him, and feel very safe."

"Are you not quite sure of him now?" To Maudie

Farrell it seemed terrible that a woman should withhold any secret in her life from the man who was going to marry her.

A delicious smile spread over Claudia's face. "Oh, yes, I am very sure, very, very sure. But a man's love is so different from a woman's—you know that without my telling you. Were Carlo a criminal, a thief, a forger, I should love him just the same—he would be my Carlo still. If he were coming out of the prison gates I would wait there for him. It would not matter. I wonder if you understand that? It is how we Italian girls are made. We love through storm and shine, through sun and rain."

Maudie assented—not very whole-heartedly, it must be confessed. She could not imagine herself remaining faithful to a thief or a forger. Once a criminal, always a criminal, she thought.

"But men are different," pursued Claudia in musing tones. "They want us to come to them without flaw or stain, without even a breath of suspicion on us. A man's love breaks under very little; a woman's supports anything."

"But you must tell him before you become his wife. It would be unfair not to do so."

"Yes, yes," assented Claudia quickly. "One day, when there is nothing but love in the air, when the world counts as nothing, I will tell him of that miserable time—how I was entrapped through ignorance, not realising what I was doing. Then he will forgive me, and pity me, and know that his Claudia is as innocent as he thought her."

Her young face had grown radiant again at the

thought of that hour when she would give up her jealously-guarded secret to her lover, and receive absolution. Her beautiful eyes grew bright and luminous. She embraced her friend impetuously.

"The bad dream is gone, dear friend. The thoughts of Carlo have chased it away. I have been a little fool. I am going forth to conquer, to be rich and famous. And when I am that, you shall share in my prosperity."

A few hours later the party was assembled at the station—the placid Beppo, Laidlaw attentive and lover-like, the Italian maid all smiles and excitement. Miss Farrell was the gravest of the party. The morning's conversation had cast a slight chill over her.

One thought was predominant in her mind: Why had Salmon and Levi taken such a sudden interest in this comparatively unknown artist? Was it purely a business gamble, or was there some other motive behind?

Just before the train started they strolled outside the station. A smart-looking girl came up, and held out her basket of roses.

She addressed Laidlaw with a winning smile; she was a handsome girl.

"Some flowers for the young ladies, sir, fresh gathered this morning."

The young man selected two bunches, and handed them to the girls, paying the flower-seller handsomely.

As she dropped a graceful curtsey, Claudia's glance fell upon her, and she turned with a little shiver to Miss Farrell.

"Oh, Maudie, dearest, what a terrible omen! Look

at her ; she is cross-eyed. It means bad luck. And an hour ago I was so happy."

Her friend laughed, and rallied her on her superstition. But, though a very healthy-minded young woman, she was not absolutely unaffected by the coincidence, coming in the wake of what had gone before.

A little later the train steamed out of the station, amid much waving of hands and handkerchiefs. Claudia Erba, with her lips still warm from her lover's kisses, shivered in her corner as she remembered the cross-eyed flower girl. Superstitious to the very core and marrow of her, she knew the incident boded no good.

CHAPTER VII

CLAUDIA RECEIVES A VISITOR

A FORTNIGHT later Salmon and his intimate friend Lewis Levi were sitting in the smoking-room of their club, the Junior Thespian, after lunch. It was one of those small establishments which draw no hard-and-fast distinctions as to the social status of the members.

Music-hall artists, variety agents, actors of the second and third ranks, musicians, ventriloquists, a few gorgeously attired gentlemen who followed the ancient profession of money-lending, met here on common ground. As long as a man was a good fellow, and possessed some connection with the arts, he was made welcome.

This was their favourite rendezvous. They were both fond of money, and spent it freely, but they had no over-vaulting ambitions, no desire for social distinction. Their reputed wealth—and in both cases it was very considerable—made them persons of great importance in the circles they affected.

"The little affair has gone well, so far," remarked Salmon. "I have had two letters this morning; a very grateful one from Claudia Erba, thanking me for all I've done for her. The other came from my

correspondent in Italy, telling me that she took from the first; that the delicacy of her art is fully appreciated in Rome, and the young men rave about her beauty. They have nicknamed her 'La Bella.'"

Levi smiled. "A wonderful profession for ups and downs. Five pounds a week to-day, one night a song or a dance that sets all London talking, and a leap to fifty or a hundred. But, of course, you had a hand in this success. You worked it by judicious booming."

"Of course," assented Salmon. "If anybody knows the ropes, I do. I can't exactly make a silk purse out of a sow's ear, but I can turn good paste into a very respectable diamond. Have you any news?"

"Not much—that is, that would interest you," replied the man named Lewis Levi, of whose origin nobody seemed to have any reliable information. That he was a child of Israel was obvious from his name and appearance, also that he spoke English fluently and perfectly. But nobody knew whether he was of English or foreign extraction.

"Stay," he exclaimed, after a pause. "I was forgetting; stupid of me, too, considering you were speaking of the little Erba. I looked in this morning to see my partner Aaronbaum."

Mr. Levi was supposed by his friends to be a speculator in theatrical enterprises, and this was true, for his name figured on more than one directorate. But the bulk of his money was made out of money-lending, although only a very few of his intimates knew it.

He was a sleeping partner in the firm of Aaronbaum, the Hebrew to whom Laidlaw had applied for assistance

a short time ago, and which boasted an aristocratic *clientèle*. But he was also connected with two other firms that flew at lower game, and made handsome profits out of their extortionate trade.

Mixing freely as he did with a class who, in the majority of cases, spent money rather faster than they earned it, he was very useful as a tout. He never lent money personally, but if an acquaintance consulted him as to the easiest method of obtaining a loan without negotiable security he would recommend one of his own firms with the cynical comment: "They'll make you pay pretty stiffly, of course, but they are respectable, according to their lights."

"Aaronbaum tells me that young Laidlaw seems to be going the pace. Borrowed a bit more than usual a little time back; wanted to make a handsome present to a woman. We can guess who she was."

"Of course," agreed Salmon. "Well, all the better. If the infatuation is so deep as all that, she will be able to twist him round her little finger."

The variety agent rose. "Well, I must be going. I've got to persuade Zerbstein to 'rest' a little longer. That job of hers has taken more time than I thought. You know she's like a caged lioness when she can't smell the footlights. And I've got to make her see that this is a more important job, and better pay. Women are the devil; it's so difficult to appeal to them on the practical side."

Levi laughed. "You should know, if anybody does; you've had lots of experience. No, I'm not coming. I'm staying here to do half an hour's hard thinking. Good-bye."

That same day Claudia was sitting in her elegant little flat in the Via Vittorio in Rome.

Things had gone well with her, so well that she had almost forgotten that unfortunate incident of the cross-eyed flower-girl.

She had succeeded beyond her wildest dreams ; truly Salmon had waved a magician's wand. She met her lover daily, and he had told her that all Rome was talking about her refined art, and, always pleasing for a woman to hear, her beauty. She learned that he was besieged with requests to introduce her to the susceptible youth of his acquaintance. He also told her that she had been affectionately christened " La Bella."

She smiled, well pleased when he told her, but had shaken her head in her pretty, gentle way.

" I am delighted to hear it, Carlo mio, but I want nobody but you. I do not know what your English girls are like ; my dear Maudie has no love affairs ; but we of the South are not fickle. I want only you, and the few old friends that I made in Rome, when I was little more than a child, eight years ago."

She had visited these old friends two days after she had arrived in Rome. She had gone to the little restaurant where she and Papa Beppo had enjoyed occasional feasts, when fortune temporarily smiled upon them.

Antonio, the proprietor, smiled all over his good-natured ugly face when she burst in upon him. Margherita, his wife, toothless now, had imprinted welcome kisses upon her glowing cheeks. The baby, now grown a sturdy boy, had greeted her shyly.

She had called on the old priest who had given her absolution, for she was a devout Catholic, and the old man had blessed her, with grave doubts in his mind as to whether her engagement at the Salone Margherita was conducive to her salvation.

She had visited a few others, all persons in a very humble state of life, persons at whom Sir Francis Laidlaw would have shuddered could he have beheld them in the flesh. But Claudia was no snob. Had she been earning two hundred a week, like Mrs. Salmon, she would have kept up with these old friends of her youth, and given them of her wealth.

She was a child of the people; she would always belong to the people. Her Carlo loved her none the worse for it. And he was the only one it was her pleasure or her inclination to study.

She had learned something from her lover about Salmon one day when they were lunching together. He had asked her rather abruptly if she knew anything concerning this man who had suddenly become such an important factor in her life.

She had answered in the negative. "No, I have never bothered my head about him, dearest. All I knew was that he was far and away the biggest of the agents. He had all the 'stars' with just a few exceptions."

"Well, after he took you up in this somewhat sudden manner, I made inquiries about him in likely quarters. I discovered that, although his name is Salmon, he is really a German, born of German parents."

Claudia was only slightly impressed. Her old father hated all Austrians, and had instilled that hatred into

her, but neither of them had any deep hostility against Germans—except as Austria's ally.

" I expect he is quite English now by adoption," she remarked indifferently.

Laidlaw had remarked : " Once a German, always a German," and had turned the conversation to other topics.

Still, it was a little shock to her to find that he was masquerading as an Englishman. Why had he changed his name ? If he was a proper British subject, what had he to be ashamed of ?

When she thought longer, a little chill crept over her as she recalled their last interview. She remembered the words, " I can make or break you." She had fancied then that there was something sinister and hard behind that bluff, genial personality. And there was always the mystery of why he and Levi had suddenly picked her out for promotion. There were, surely, dozens of girls in the lower ranks of the profession who had equal or superior talent.

For Claudia was very level-headed, and not in the least vain. She was more than pleased with her success, but she did not attribute it entirely to her own merit. The astute Salmon, with his experienced advertising methods and his powerful influence, must have had a considerable share in it. Why had she been picked out ?

No handsome girl can be ignorant of her good looks ; her own mirror tells her that. But Salmon, after the first few moments, had abandoned the pose of middle-aged admirer. Lewis Levi had never paid her a compliment, had behaved to her as to his own

daughter. The explanation was not to be sought in that direction.

Claudia was in a perturbed frame of mind this particular afternoon. Things were going well, and yet she could not help a chill foreboding that something unpleasant was about to happen. Like a bird she had lifted her wings to the sunshine, but she seemed to feel the menace of the gathering cloud.

She had poured out her feelings to her friend, Miss Farrell, in a long letter. She had finished with the words, " I feel so much better now that I have told you my inmost thoughts. How I wish you were with me. One always wants a woman to talk to, however much one loves a man."

She sighed, and laid down her pen. Her maid, Gemma, opened the door and told her that a visitor wished to see her. He would not give his name ; the signorina would not know it. He had come on business.

What sort of a man was he ? Gemma described him, tersely but faithfully. Was he an Italian ? She could not be sure. He spoke Italian fluently, but there was a trace of accent. He might be English, French, or Russian.

Claudia ordered him to be shown in. She half suspected he might be an agent who had heard of her success and wanted to sound her as to her contract with the Salone Margherita.

The man was shown in, a tall, cadaverous-looking creature with a sharp nose and piercing dark eyes. His clothes were well cut and fitted him well, but they were old and shabby. She scrutinised him closely, and could not make up her mind whether he was an Italian

who resembled an Englishman or an Englishman who resembled an Italian.

Evidently he was not an agent, or at any rate an agent of importance. The gorgeous Salmon, the dapper Mr. Villiers, would not have had such a shabby person in their offices.

"Your name, please," she asked curtly.

He spoke in Italian, with just a touch of accent.

"My name, signorina, is Joseph Blunden, at your service."

"You are, then, an Englishman?" She had guessed as much from his intonation.

"Yes, and no. I am a blend of nationalities. My father and grandfather were English. My mother was Italian, my grandmother French. I believe, earlier than that, there is some German blood, if I could trace it. I speak all four languages with equal fluency."

Claudia smiled at the grave air with which he related his pedigree. She did not quite like the look of him, but he was very polite and very suave.

"Be seated, please, and tell me your business."

He accepted her invitation, bent his piercing eyes upon her, and answered in his low, well-modulated voice:

"It is unpleasant business, I regret to say, and I fear it may distress the signorina. But necessity compels."

CHAPTER VIII

THE FIRM OF LANGSTON AND CO.

CLAUDIA'S face blanched as she listened to those significant words. That strange foreboding of evil which had assailed her all day, and prompted her to write that confidential letter to her friend, was about to be justified. She tried to present a brave front.

"How can I be distressed by anything you, an utter stranger, have to tell me?" she asked in a voice so changed that she hardly recognised it as her own.

The evil-faced man—for it was a sinister face when you looked closely—smiled as he answered:

"Nobody ever makes a slip without leaving some traces behind, signorina. And those traces are more likely to be discovered by a stranger than a friend."

He paused a second to mark the effect of those words, which he uttered in his low, distinct accents. She closed her eyes—she could not bear that piercing scrutiny, which seemed to read every thought—and said faintly, "Go on, and quickly. Let me know the worst."

Mr. Blunden resumed: "Some short time ago—about eighteen months or so, to be precise—the Signorina was what is called in English 'in low water.'

For some time past her agent had been unable to procure her any engagements, and it looked as if her career on the music-hall had come to an abrupt termination. Have I spoken the truth so far ? "

She nodded, and said in the same faint voice " Yes."

Much to her relief, he released her from that penetrating gaze which was so sinister. When next he addressed her it was directly, in the first person, instead of the third, which he had been using up to the present.

" You could write a good hand, and you had been taught typing ; you had also some knowledge of figures. It occurred to you that with these qualifications you would find no difficulty in obtaining a post which would enable you to tide over your present difficulties. Of course, you trusted that the necessity was only temporary, that you would ultimately return to your profession."

" How did you find all this out ? " she gasped.

" I will come to that all in good time. Out of some half-dozen replies to your advertisement, in which you gave an assumed name, so that it should not interfere with your stage prospects, one appealed to you more than the rest, for some reason that I don't know."

" I don't know either," said Claudia miserably, ' except that it was written in a less formal tone."

" You went to the address given, and found a small motor establishment in the West of London. You were received by a man of pleasant manners and plausible address, who informed you that he was the proprietor and had only lately started the business. He made a favourable impression upon you, and he offered you a much higher salary than you expected, on the ground

that a young woman of your prepossessing appearance would be useful in the business on occasions, apart from the clerical duties."

"He was a wily scoundrel," cried Claudia, stung to momentary anger at the recollection of the deception which had been practised upon her.

Mr. Blunden smiled. His smile was, if possible, more sinister than his expression.

"He was certainly not a person of strict integrity, any more than I am. But he could be very charming when he liked, and for a time he completely imposed upon you. So much so that in a burst of confidence you revealed to him your identity, told him your real name, and your connection with the music-hall stage. This was highly imprudent of you, signorina. For, had it not been for that unpardonable slip of yours, it is a million chances to one I should not have the honour of sitting in this cosy little flat at the present moment. He was a very handsome fellow, I know. Will you think me rude if I suggest that he must have fascinated you just a little bit?"

"Do not speak of it," cried the poor girl miserably. Her face burned at the recollection of this ingratiating scoundrel who had tricked her so vilely. She had taken him for what he pretended to be, an honest, straightforward Englishman, and she had discovered him to be a rogue and a swindler.

The clear, expressionless tones of Blunden raised her from that hateful reverie.

"And then came that episode—the second unfortunate blunder you made during your brief connection with him."

Ah, did she not remember it all so vividly? This plausible scoundrel had taken her into his confidence, as she believed, from the start. There were only three persons in the establishment, if the small premises could be dignified by such a high-sounding name—the proprietor, a young man as innocent as she, and herself.

He had explained to her that he was ambitious and enterprising, and possessed of a very limited capital. He had invested the small amount he could scrape together in the purchase of half a dozen motor-cars, on which he had paid only a portion of the purchase money. The rest would be paid when he had sold them.

His object was to sell them quickly by a novel means of advertisement, which he professed to explain to her, but which she was not business-like enough to understand.

He told her all this in a frank and boyish manner; he was quite a young man, on the right side of thirty. The impression left on her mind was that he was amazingly clever and industrious and would speedily make a fortune, if circumstances worked in his favour, if he had that measure of good luck without which nobody can succeed.

Then one day he had come to her and said business was not going as well as it should. Only four of the six cars had been sold, and most of the money had gone to pay overdue instalments and the heavy current expenses.

A brilliant idea had occurred to him. He must have testimonials to frame and hang in his office and show to the intending purchasers who came in answer to his artful advertisements.

"That's the sort of thing to fetch them, eh, Claudia?" he had asked when he had outlined this brilliant plan.

He had taken to calling her by her Christian name from the day when she had revealed her identity to him, and she had not resented it. She was not in love with him—that divine emotion had only come with the advent of Charles Laidlaw—but she would never deny that, in a certain sense, this genial and buoyant swindler had attracted her.

Claudia applauded the suggestion; it was another proof of his amazing cleverness.

"Capital," she said simply. "But where are we going to get them from? You have only sold four cars up to the present. If you get the four people who bought them to write and say how satisfied they are, that won't make much of a show, will it?"

The man, whose assumed name was Langston, smiled cunningly. She thought, at the time, he did not look quite so attractive when he smiled like that. It was an evil, not a genial smile. "Invent them, my dear, invent them. We will imagine, say, a dozen people who have bought these cars, and out of the gratitude of their hearts write us overwhelming letters of recommendation."

Claudia was a little puzzled. Her old father, Beppo, was a fiery Socialist, and roundly declared that all men of business were rogues. A capitalist was to him anathema. She hardly subscribed to this doctrine herself; she thought the world required capitalists. If there were not men with money to run music-halls, for example, it would be a poor look-out for artists.

Thus the question presented itself to her simple intelligence.

Mr. Langston was hardly a capitalist ; at any rate, a small one ; and therefore his offences against a properly-ordered community, according to dear Papa Beppo, were trivial ones. Still, she had an undefined sort of feeling that Mr. Langston's proposition was not exactly fair and square.

" Is it quite honest, do you think ? " she ventured timidly.

Mr. Langston's smile grew more cunning and more suggestive of depths of human nature which she was unwilling, or too inexperienced, to fathom.

" What an innocent little creature it is, to be sure. And you on the halls, too. I should have thought you had picked up a bit there."

She shrank back from him ; it was the first time he had revealed his native coarseness. He noticed her repulsion, and changed his attitude.

" Forgive me, little girl ; I was rude. In business, you know, we have to go near the border-line, but we don't overstep it. Now, as regards this matter of testimonials. There are some that are genuine, some that are paid for, many that are faked."

Claudia's view changed a little at this frank exposition of facts. Her father maintained that all capitalists were rogues, without one honourable exception. She thought there might be a middle way. Some were very small rogues.

He had corrected the bad impression. He hastened to pursue his advantage, and exerted his most persuasive manner.

"Now look here, little woman, it is done every day, more especially in struggling businesses like mine. I can buy two testimonials, from two well-known people who are hard up, for fifty pounds apiece. They will take the cars for a run, and write me a note, making it appear as if they were the purchasers, instead of only having had a pleasure trip. There's two; I can fake several others. And,"—he paused a moment to observe the effect of his words on her—"and this is where you can come in. I told you, when we started, that you could help in the business."

Yes, she remembered that, also remembered that her salary was a handsome one, according to the market rate, and that her clerical post was a sinecure. She had often felt she was taking her wages for nothing. She would certainly help her employer, if it was in her power.

"How can I help?" she asked, lifting perturbed eyes to his bold and confident gaze. She had an uneasy feeling that he was leading her along a slippery and perhaps dangerous path. But she was only half conscious of it.

Langston explained, with many pauses and much evasive verbiage, what he required of her. It amounted to this. He would furnish her with a sheet of note-paper bearing the address of a well-known Parisian hotel, and an envelope to match.

She was to write in the third person to Langston & Co. as the Comtesse de Beville, expressing her thorough satisfaction with the car she had recently purchased. This letter, post-dated, would be sent under cover to a friend in Paris, who would forward it to London.

The letter would be framed along with the other testimonials. The envelope would be kept by Langston, to produce as a genuine proof of its having been sent from Paris, in case anybody was sceptical.

At first she demurred. She admitted its ingenuity, and, in a way, it appealed to her sense of the humorous, but it was distinctly not what the English would call "cricket." She begged to be excused.

Langston, doubtless, would have liked to shake her for her stupidity. But, as he could not do that, he argued with her instead.

"You know the cars are first class, you know where they come from. Why do you hesitate to say so?"

"As myself, Claudia Erba, yes. As the Comtesse de Beville, no," she had replied.

"That is a detail," he had said airily. "Suppose you got an engagement in comic opera to-morrow, and was billed as, say, the Duchesse de Millefleurs. What is the harm in that?"

Claudia shook her head. "It is not the same in the very least," she said stubbornly.

Langston had little patience with these subtleties, but he kept his temper admirably. He patted her on the shoulder.

"Think it over, little woman. It is really nothing I ask you, and you will help me enormously. Go home—there'll be nothing more doing to-day—and think it over. Remember how it will help me."

She went home and thought it over. She had nobody to consult. Her father was a Socialist and a visionary, a mere babe with regard to practical affairs. Maudie

Farrell was her close friend, and a sensible girl. But Claudia distrusted feminine judgment.

At that period there was no Charles Laidlaw from whom to seek advice.

And Langston had been very kind to her. He had often given her days off, when business was slack; he had supplemented her weekly salary with an extra half-sovereign. He had said it would help him enormously.

She knew the cars were first rate, and she didn't know his ultimate game—to get as much cash in as he could, and show a clean pair of heels at the finish. Would it hurt anybody very much if she posed as the Comtesse de Beville, hailing from a well-known Parisian hotel?

She wrote the letter, and Langston bought her a nice little piece of jewellery as a token of his approbation. Like many rogues and swindlers, he was generous and open-handed. Claudia thought it was nice of him, and showed the man had some delicacy of feeling.

The letter was framed, along with several others, not one of them genuine. The envelope was kept in his private room, in case it was wanted as corroborative evidence.

On the strength of the testimonials, the first six cars were sold out, and paid for out of the proceeds, Mr. Langston retaining the profit between buying and selling. Another six were purchased on somewhat easier terms as regards initial payment

In three weeks these were sold, and the wily swindler found himself with a good cash balance in hand. If he had kept on, he might have founded quite a decent business. But the thing had palled; it was a bit too

slow. He was a born adventurer, and he was longing for a change of scene. It was time to clear out.

Claudia went down one morning, and found Mr. Langston alone, the young man who replied to inquiries when his chief was absent had been dismissed the day before, unknown to her.

Langston briefly explained the situation. "Had enough of it, little girl; not big enough. I'm closing down and off to-day. Here's this, in lieu of notice." He thrust three five-pound notes in her hand. "Lie low for a bit. There may be inquiries about the firm after I've left. Well, they won't trace you, under your assumed name. You'll be quite safe."

Claudia gasped. In a flash it all came to her. The man was a swindler. He had got these cars on credit, he had sold them for cash, and was off with the proceeds.

In those few minutes she turned from a girl to a woman. She had known of evil, but she had never come face to face with it till now. All the roguery and wickedness of the world stood incarnate in the nervous, excited man who stood before her.

She cast a hurried glance round the bare walls. The testimonials had been removed.

"What has become of my letter, the one I wrote as the Comtesse de Beville?" she asked wildly.

"I took them all away. I shall burn them before I leave." Perhaps, when he said so, he meant to do it.

"No, no," she gasped. "Don't burn it. Send it back to me, then I shall know it is safe."

He promised, but he never kept his promise. She suffered tortures for months. But time went by, and nothing happened. It was a very common case of

swindling, an extension of the confidence trick, practised by a wily rogue on hard-headed business men instead of a gullible member of the foolish public. He had created confidence, to abuse it in the end.

She confided her secret at length to her father and Maudie Farrell. They both agreed that she could easily establish her innocence. But, while they both comforted her with this assurance, they both knew that a woman who exists by public favour cannot bear the breath of suspicion.

Mr. Blunden's voice roused her from that long reverie in which she had lived over again her brief connection with the firm of Langston & Co.

"I have in my possession the letter which you wrote as the Comtesse de Beville. A few weeks ago when you were doing third-rate turns at minor music-halls, it would not have been worth very much."

She made a brave show of defiance. "It is worth nothing now."

"Pardon me." The dark eyes took on a sinister gleam. "That letter is in my possession. I will part with it on terms."

Try hard as she could, it was impossible to keep her voice steady. "Keep it, and do what you like with it. It is all one to me."

"It is not all one to you, and you know it as well as I do," went on the smooth, imperturbable voice. "Better hear my terms."

"State them, please."

The tall man rose to his full height, and looked down upon her without any apparent emotion.

"To Claudia Erba they would have been a few paltry

pounds, paid at her own convenience. To 'La Bella,' the popular star of the Salone Margherita, and the friend, perhaps the fiancée, of Charles Laidlaw, of the British Embassy, my terms are a thousand pounds cash."

CHAPTER IX

IN THE TOILS

SHE laughed hysterically when the cold-blooded miscreant had finished.

"A thousand pounds! Why, you must be mad to ask me such a sum. Do you know how much I could put my hand on at the present moment, if my life depended on it? About sixty pounds, which I have scraped together, week by week, for over a year."

"I don't suppose you are very wealthy at present," was the cold retort. "But you soon will be. When people make a hit in your profession, their salary goes up by leaps and bounds. Say that you are getting twenty-five pounds a week from this trial engagement. In a month you will command a hundred or more. You could easily spare a thousand pounds then."

"But you said cash," was Claudia's reply to this cold, calculating blackmailer. "If I did ever earn a hundred a week, it would take nearly three months for me to pay you."

Mr. Blunden reflected for a few moments; he was evidently thinking things over.

"I don't want to be unreasonable," he said at length. "Let us say five hundred down, and your written

promise to pay the balance by monthly instalments in a year's time. Those are easy terms, surely."

"And supposing I acceded to your demand, where am I to get the five hundred from?"

"When you are sure of getting money in, it is always easy to anticipate it, signorina. I daresay I could introduce you myself to a moneylender who would let you have it—of course, on terms—on the strength of your prospects."

She recoiled from him with horror. She, the thrifty Italian girl, who looked at every shilling before she spent it, put herself in the hands of a harpy who would charge her fifty to a hundred per cent! "Never!" she cried firmly. "Never! I will do this much to get that letter back. I will keep five pounds for myself, and give you all the rest of my savings—some fifty-five pounds."

The scoundrel laughed softly. "If you were the Claudia Erba of a few weeks ago, I might accept your offer. Even then I think I should want a small slice of your salary for some little time to come. But 'La Bella' must pay my price. Come, signorina, do be reasonable. Your position is worth that sum to you."

She shuddered at the threat conveyed in those significant words. He evidently meant to ruin her if she failed to comply with his insatiable demands.

"I will never go to a moneylender," she said firmly.

He shrugged his shoulders. "So be it, let us rule him out of the question. Well, a charming young woman like yourself can find no difficulty in obtaining a temporary loan. I have heard of your agent, Mr. Salmon. He is reputed to be a rich man. Then there

is the gentleman who admires you so much—Mr. Laidlaw."

Evidently he had learned all about her. She felt dazed and helpless, as if she were in the clutch of some foul and obscene beast of prey.

But still she made her feeble struggles to escape. " Mr. Laidlaw is not rich ; he is in debt himself ; he has told me so. How could I ask Mr. Salmon such a favour so early in our acquaintance, and what excuse could I give for wanting so much money ? "

" Women don't usually display such a lack of invention in these little matters," was Blunden's cynical comment. " What does your sex want money for ? Why, for clothes, amusements, all sorts of things. You have got on in the world ; you will rise higher. You want at once to adapt your environment to your prospects. You cannot wait for the slow process of accumulation. You want to anticipate your coming wealth."

" I cannot go to Mr. Laidlaw ; I will not go to Mr Salmon," she said doggedly, as she stamped her foot, and a hectic spot burned bright on each cheek.

Mr. Blunden did not move a muscle of his impassive countenance. " In that case it is useless to prolong this interview. The little affair must take its course, and the already famous and popular ' La Bella ' must return to obscurity."

" You mean you would ruin me," she faltered. She had a lingering hope that the man might be indulging in bluff, that if she stood firm she would baffle him. What could he gain by ruining her, after all ? Only revenge.

" In the event of your refusing to take any steps

towards meeting my reasonable demands, yes," replied this unwavering scoundrel. "I shall tell the management of the Salone Margherita, your agent, Mr. Salmon, and, most important of all, your friend Mr. Laidlaw, of the little episode in the life of Claudia Erba which she had fondly hoped was buried in oblivion."

Her face went the colour of death. It would be bad enough to say farewell to ambition, to surrender all hopes of the bright career unfolding before her. But all would not be lost in that event. She could hide herself in some quarter to which there was no chance of this shameful story penetrating, and work humbly for her living, like other daughters of the people.

But that her beloved Carlo should be made to think evil of her—this was more than she could bear.

"Come to me in three—in two months' time," she cried desperately. "I will give you all that I can then, and more as I can make it. I will save and save, and live on a crust, if you will do this."

He smiled suavely, but he was not disposed to show any mercy.

"We unfortunate devils, who have to live on our wits, cannot afford to wait, signorina. We have to do our business swiftly. I regret that I cannot offer you more favourable terms. I have stretched a point already."

He watched her cunningly. She would find the money somehow, he was sure. If she was prepared to sacrifice her career she would not give up her lover.

She thought and thought, well knowing she was in a trap. "I could go to the police," she blurted out, voicing a swift idea that had come into her head.

They have a short way with blackmailers, and I expect you have a pretty black record."

The threat did not disturb him in the least; he knew that he held the winning cards.

"How will that help you? Mind you, I am not resenting the suggestion in the least. Go to the police. I tell my story just the same. You have ruined me, but in the meantime I have returned the compliment."

Yes, he was quite right; she could not afford to take that step, dearly as she would have loved to do it. There was no way of closing his mouth, except by yielding to his demands.

She covered her face with her hands to shut out the sight of this cold, calculating scoundrel who traded on human weakness, and had no pity for his victim.

She heard the hateful, smooth voice speaking in its slow, measured accents.

"The thing is all so very simple, if you would look at it from a business point of view. You have committed an indiscretion—the world in which you move would call it a dishonourable action—and you must pay for it. The ways and the means are ready to your hand, if you only exercise your wits a little bit."

"I must have time to think," she gasped, with a stifled sob.

"Of course, I don't intend to hold a loaded pistol at your head. After you have got over the first shock you will find yourself capable of thinking very clearly. A paltry thousand pounds to a woman with your prospects! Bah! it is a mere bagatelle. After the payment of that, a safe and honourable career, a

lover who is devoted to you, Joseph Blunden removes himself from the scene, and crosses your path no more."

"A lover who is devoted to you." The words repeated themselves in her dulled brain. Everything else might go, but she could not afford to lose Carlo.

"How long will you give me?" she asked in the same sobbing voice, that stirred no chord of compunction in the callous nature of this blackmailer.

"I will give you a week from now; no, I will make it ten days. It will take you time to make necessary arrangements. At the end of ten days I will do myself the honour of presenting myself again for your final answer."

He bowed, and was going noiselessly from the room when she called him back.

"Stay a moment. I asked you at the beginning of our interview how you found this all out. You said you would come to it in good time, but you are leaving without telling me. How did the letter come into your possession?"

He came back, with his gliding, cat-like motion. "I forgot—a thousand pardons! It was a curious coincidence; one of those pieces of luck that we soldiers of fortune experience now and again, but not so often as we would wish. Of course, you remember Edward Langston well?"

She shuddered as the image of the big, plausible man who had overcome her scruples, and, in a way, hypnotised her to his will, rose before her.

"Too well, alas!" she replied in tones of disgust.

"Do you see any likeness between us, signorina?"

She looked closely, but could trace none. Langston was a typical Englishman. This creature looked what he was—a hybrid. She shook her head.

"I can see no resemblance in form or feature. You resemble each other in this, that you are both scoundrels."

It was an imprudent speech, perhaps, but she could not forgo it. Whether she bought him off, or suffered him to ruin her, she would make him wince if she could.

But he did not even wince—he seemed rather amused than otherwise. "You are severe, but I freely forgive it under the circumstances. Well, Edward Langston was my brother, and, as you know, like myself, a *chevalier d'industrie*."

She opened her eyes wide, and examined him more closely. There was not the slightest resemblance between the two men.

"To speak more correctly, he was my half-brother —two years my senior. He was English on both sides, but I am afraid he was not more respectable in consequence of that fact. I think, on the whole, he was cleverer than I; anyway, he had more luck. But he was impatient and restless. If he had stuck to that motor business he might have made a little fortune."

"How did you get the letter?" asked Claudia sharply.

"Ah, I was digressing; thanks for pulling me up. Well, on the day before he left for abroad, leaving behind him several disappointed and furious creditors, I went to bid him good-bye. He had taken all the

testimonials out of the frames and handed them over to me, asking me to destroy them, with one exception."

Claudia looked up swiftly; she guessed what was coming.

Blunden went on with his narrative. "The one exception was a letter purporting to be written by a certain Comtesse de Beville, and was dated from a well-known hotel in Paris. This he enjoined me to send to a certain lady, Claudia Erba, who belonged to the music-hall profession, and had taken a situation as his secretary owing to her lack of engagements."

"He was better than I thought he was, then," said Claudia. "He did remember his promise."

"Yes, he was always a sentimental sort of fellow where women were concerned," replied Blunden, with a shade of contempt in his tones. "And I expect he had tender memories of you, and was sorry for the trick he played on your innocence and inexperience."

"And why did you not carry out his injunction?" asked Claudia indignantly.

"I'm not a man of impulse, nor do I think I am capable of any disinterested or kindly actions," replied the callous Blunden, who seemed to exult in his absence of morality. "Also, I have a peculiar kind of brain that enables me to scent an opportunity, however remote, more quickly than most people."

Yes, she thought she could understand that. His half-brother was a rogue with some genial and human qualities. This man was a cold, calculating scoundrel, without a single redeeming point.

"I questioned him, and he told me your history; you had been very frank with him. Of course, he

had no idea what was passing in my mind. I take it you can guess what occurred to me."

"Yes, I can," said Claudia. Had he retained a shred of decency in his composition, the glance of scorn and loathing which she turned upon him would have shrivelled him where he stood. But he was impervious, and only smiled with a deeper sense of satisfaction at his own cleverness.

"I reasoned that Claudia Erba was an insignificant artist with nothing like a permanent position on the stage, of no use to a man like myself, who was out for big money But I did not part with that letter. There are ups and downs in the variety world. There was a remote chance that, one day, Claudia Erba might make a hit and become famous. In that case she would be game worth pursuing."

"And you make your living out of this sort of thing?" Claudia's voice should have pierced to the marrow of his bones, but his smile only grew more self-satisfied and complacent.

"Suddenly I see that the insignificant Claudia Erba has blossomed into a 'star' at the Salone Margherita, pushed, no doubt, by the energetic Salmon and the clique he employs. That means she will command big salaries in the no distant future. I also learn that a certain gentleman of good family and position, Mr. Charles Laidlaw, is infatuated with her charm and beauty. I remember that unfortunate letter which she wrote at the dictation of my swindling brother, good fellow that he is in many ways, and which I had the good sense not to part with. Need I explain further?"

"I understand perfectly." The miserable Claudia

rose and pointed to the door with an unsteady hand. The presence of this moral leper seemed to contaminate the atmosphere. He was vile and unclean. For the first time in her life she had a glimpse into the criminal mind. The gaols were full of such men as this.

"Will you leave me now? I shall expect you in ten days' time for my final answer."

The tall man bowed with exaggerated courtesy. "I shall present myself, signorina, to the day and the hour. I am sure that, by some means, you will procure the sum I have named. You will not give up your career and sacrifice your lover for the want of a paltry amount like that."

The door closed on him, and Claudia, alone and free to give way to her emotion, burst into bitter sobbing, and cried as if her heart would break.

CHAPTER X

THE HUNCHBACK

FOR a long time she abandoned herself to her distress. Then, presently, the reaction set in. She rose, and went into her bedroom, and removed as far as possible the traces of her discomposure.

This done, she returned to the little *salon*, and summoned all her courage, all her wits. She had got to think and to act. In ten days from now she had to decide her destiny.

Her life, on the whole, had been a hard one, as it ever must be with the majority of the daughters of the people. She had had to think for herself, to fight for herself, from the early days of childhood. She had known grinding poverty; once or twice she had experienced the actual pangs of hunger, when her father was out of work.

This hard early training, whose severity had been relaxed during her later years, had given her a certain stoical courage, had taught her self-reliance.

Still, she felt sorely in need of a friend now to whom she could turn for advice. She was dining with Laidlaw to-night. Should she give herself the exquisite relief of telling him of the foolish thing she had done, without

reckoning the possible consequences of the terrible retribution which had overtaken her?

Ah! if she were quite sure that he would accept her explanation the thing would be easy enough.

But would he? Their knowledge of each other was limited to a short period. He loved her very dearly; of that she was sure. But he loved her because he believed her to be pure and true, the equal of any woman in his own world, except as regards that accident of obscure birth, to which he attached no significance.

But could she run the risk of altering that ideal of her, which, no doubt, he cherished in his own heart? Would he read in that confession the sordid story of an adventuress, who had helped a plausible scoundrel in his rascally trade for the sake of money? Would he not rather believe her to be an accomplice than a victim?

For she could not account to herself by what mental process she had silenced her own scruples at the time. A wave of disgust swept over her as she had to admit that, at that period, this swindling rogue with the plausible tongue and the persuasive manner had held a curious fascination for her. She was not sure that if he had offered her marriage she would not have accepted him. The idea filled her with loathing now, but at that time she had not met Laidlaw.

Her friend, Miss Farrell, was of opinion that it was incumbent on her to tell that secret to her lover before she married him. Claudia had not been so sure that she would ever tell him. English people had somewhat stiff-necked notions of personal honour. Anyway,

after anxious thought, she finally made up her mind that she could not tell him yet.

There was nobody to fall back upon but her one woman friend. She wrote a second letter, detailing the visit of Blunden, and despatched it to Miss Farrell, with a request that she would telegraph her advice. She had ten days in which to think and act. There was plenty of time to get Maudie's answer.

She felt relieved when she had done this. Miss Farrell was a very sensible and level-headed young woman. Claudia would perhaps have preferred a man's judgment, but no man was available.

Miss Farrell's message came back without delay. "Am puzzling very much over it, will write later. Consult Charles. If not possible, do what agent suggested."

She had made it, of course, as cryptic as possible, to prevent its being understood by a third person.

Claudia had fully made up her mind that she would not confess to her lover—at any rate, not now. The idea of availing herself of that strange suggestion made by Salmon in his London office, on the day when she bade him good-bye, had, of course, occurred to her. She must give herself away to somebody in any case, and she had a shrewd idea that Salmon was not over-scrupulous himself, or a severe judge of want of moral fibre in others.

She could imagine an expression of slow incredulity, gradually changing into actual repulsion, stealing over Charles Laidlaw's expressive face, when she faltered forth her shameful confession—that she had written a lying testimonial to enable a fraudulent tradesman

to cheat more easily his creditors. Could he ever be brought to believe, this straight, honest English gentleman, that she had not been conscious of the turpitude of her act?

Salmon would not be likely to look on it from the same point of view. He would regard it as a trick not to be defended from an ethical standpoint, but quite excusable in a struggling tradesman, who was in a hurry to scoop in his gains.

She felt a little easier, now that she had received that telegram; she felt she had some support in any step she took.

She copied out the cabalistic words inscribed on the card Salmon had given her, and handed them into the advertisement office of the *Tribuna*, signing it with her initials. She gave the mysterious "Gobbo" the choice of two days; he might be a busy man. She had no doubt in her own mind that he would turn up. Salmon, who was evidently full of mystery himself, had spoken of him as a man who could be relied on at a pinch.

How had Salmon guessed that she would ever be in want of such assistance? That was a riddle that time alone would solve.

She went about during these days in a peculiar condition. She was half alert, half subconscious. Her feelings were akin to those of the timid animal, sensitive to danger, who stumbles half blindly through the woods and fields, dimly conscious of the snares and traps that are menacing him at every few yards, and trusting to chance that he may escape with life and liberty.

She waited outside the chief post-office at noon. Gobbo would have read the advertisement in the morning. If he were not otherwise engaged, he would respond to the imperative summons.

She paced up and down for a couple of hours in vain. Salmon had given a description of him that could not be mistaken. He was a hunchback, and he would wear black kid gloves as a mark of identification.

Weary and dispirited, she wended her way back to the flat in the Via Vittorio. She had begun to hate her home, the Salone Margherita, everything, by now. The one bright spot left in her life was her meetings with Laidlaw. And she had to show a brave and smiling front to her lover, while her heart was being rent asunder. The world could hold no greater spiritual torture than this.

Her maid, Gemma, met her at the door, her eyes dancing with excitement.

"A most extraordinary person is waiting in the *salon*, a hunchback, and he wears black kid gloves. He explained that he had an appointment with the signorina, but he was detained an hour beyond the time. He concluded that you would not wait so long, and had come on here. I told him I was expecting you every minute, and invited him in. Have I done wrong?"

"No, Gemma, you have done perfectly right." She went into the sitting-room, her heart beating almost to suffocation. Was the mysterious Gobbo going to be a deliverer? Was he about to cut the meshes of the net in which she was so securely bound?

A small wizened man, of apparently middle age, rose at her approach, and bowed profoundly, with true foreign politeness.

She reached out to him a fluttering hand. He drew off one of the black kid gloves, and pressed it for a moment. She looked at him curiously. He had a long, intelligent face, his eyes were very brilliant, but they had a kindly expression. His voice was very soft and gentle. And he spoke Italian without the slightest trace of foreign accent.

" I put my initials at the end of the advertisement. You guessed that I was Claudia Erba, and you found out, or perhaps knew, where I lived ? " she said.

The hunchback spoke in his low, modulated tones. " I am the confidential agent of the great Mr. Salmon ; there are few who know how great he is, and how far-reaching his influence. I attend to his interests in Italy. He takes great care of his clients. I have a long list of people who may want me to help them out of temporary difficulties."

He paused significantly, and then added : " The Signorina Erba requires my assistance at the present moment, otherwise she would not have inserted that advertisement in the *Tribuna*.

" Mr. Salmon put me on your list ? Since when ? " inquired Claudia shrewdly.

" He puts everybody on his list so soon as they leave England. As long as his clients are in Italy, they are under my protection. If they go to France or America, they are looked after by others."

There was a long silence. Claudia was the first to break it.

"What is your nationality, Signor Gobbo? That is the only name by which I know you."

"I will reveal my identity later on," replied Gobbo, with a charming smile; "later on, when we know each other better. Suffice it, for the present moment, that you are in trouble, and you need my advice."

"And your friend and employer, Mr. Salmon, knew that this was impending, and gave me the means of communicating with you."

The hunchback smiled a slow, grave smile. Claudia distrusted him, as a matter of course; he was so obviously the instrument of others. But her twenty-three years' experience of life showed her that, scoundrel as he might be, he was not a callous and predatory beast of prey like Blunden.

"Mr. Salmon is a man in receipt of much information; many secrets filter through to him. I cannot, at present, say more. I had private instructions to be in readiness for you. He was apprehensive, from the peculiar knowledge he possesses, that the signorina might be confronted with some serious trouble that might menace her professional and private interests."

She sank back in her chair, oblivious, for the moment, of the kindly-looking, smooth-spoken hunchback. She had been very elated with that chance meeting with Lewis Levi at old Luigi's restaurant. Was that meeting the beginning of her present trouble? Would she have avoided it all if she had remained the insignificant Claudia Erba, singing her pretty little songs at obscure music-halls at a low salary?

The smooth voice of the hunchback roused her from her reverie.

"I will not tell you my name at present; it is an Italian one—assumed of course. I am a Russian by birth, but I am really of no country. I belong to the great Brotherhood of Nations. I am a Socialist, a revolutionary, incidentally an anarchist, and a pacifist, if such terms can be reconciled."

Claudia was not as much startled as he had expected. Dear Papa Beppo was certainly a Socialist and a revolutionary, with mild and not very bloodthirsty leanings towards anarchy. As a matter of fact, the excellent Beppo would not have killed a fly with his own hand.

"You get through anarchy by some mysterious means to pacifism," said Claudia, with a comprehensive wave of her hand. "Now, Signor Gobbo, to my affairs. I am in great trouble."

The brilliant eyes, with their unwavering but kindly gleam, rested on her intently.

"Poor little girl, you are very young to be in such trouble! And just when things are looking so bright for you. I have heard of the triumphs of 'La Bella.'"

"And what are they worth?" cried Claudia, with a choking sob. "Oh, that I were back again at my third-rate halls, where I was too insignificant to become the prey of a blackmailer."

The hunchback rose and paced the room, apparently in great agitation. An intense expression came over his long lean face. He crossed to her and patted her shoulder.

"Do not cry, little girl; it unnerves me. Tell me all your trouble. You are not the type of which

criminals are made. What silly fault did you commit that you should be the victim of blackmail? Tell me everything. Half-confidences are no good."

Falteringly, with tears raining down her cheeks, she told him of that long-ago episode, of the visit of Blunden and his rapacious demands.

The hunchback again rose after she had finished her recital, and paced the room restlessly.

"I know him well," he said after he had finished his restless pacing. "A tiger on two legs, without ruth or pity, a member of a vast organisation as ruthless as himself. And I serve that organisation too. I can show you no more pity than he."

Her face went white. "Are you not going to help me?" she gasped.

The man, whom she only knew as "Gobbo," spoke very gently.

"I am in a very tender mood to-night; you remind me so of my dead child, and I will advise you for your own good. Suppose you defy this blackmailer, and he spreads these reports that ruin your career and drive you from your profession. You are a daughter of the people; you can work with your hands. Life is not lost because you made one false step."

She lifted up her tear-stained face. "But you do not understand. It would be hard to give up that, just when I am on the threshold of my career. But I would let that go."

"Yes, you could let that go; and what is there left behind that makes you hesitate?" he asked, in his gentle tones.

"My lover," she cried wildly. "My lover, who is

heart of my heart, and life of my life. Anything rather than that he should despise me."

There was a long and intense silence, only broken by the deep ticking of the clock on the mantelpiece. And then "Gobbo" spoke.

"Love still rules the world, although he has not had much to say to me. You want to square this blackguard in order to keep your lover. Would he not still take you to his arms if you told him all?"

"An honourable English gentleman, would he believe my story if I did tell him? Would he not think me an accomplice instead of a foolish victim?"

"Gobbo" nodded his head. "It is likely; the English are obstinate and pig-headed. Well, you want me to save you from Blunden. I can do it; not myself, but through means of the organisation to which both he and I belong. But you will change one blackmailer for another."

"What do you mean?" cried Claudia.

The hunchback bent on her his brilliant gaze. But there was an infinite pity in his voice as he answered her, dropping his words slowly, as if every one cost him an effort.

"Poor heedless child, caught in the snare. If I save you from Blunden you must pay me a heavy price, and it will be exacted to the uttermost farthing—be assured of that. But perhaps it will be the cheaper of the two. You will still be 'La Bella,' and, possibly more important to you, you will keep your lover."

CHAPTER XI

CLAUDIA MAKES A RESOLVE

A FORTNIGHT later Claudia was sitting in her dressing-room at the Salone Margherita, after having finished her turn, which took place in the middle of the evening.

Her reception had been more enthusiastic than ever. Her delicate art, the charm with which she sang those dainty little songs in a voice which only needed greater robustness to have qualified her for the lyric stage, had captivated the Italians from the first, and her popularity was still growing.

She looked round at the flowers which had been left by her admirers. There were a few letters lying on the table, which she opened and read carelessly ; they were all expressive of the delight experienced in listening to the strains of the gifted " La Bella."

Amongst them was a little pencilled note from Laidlaw, reminding her that he was coming to supper that night at the flat in the Via Vittorio.

She pressed it to her lips, and the ready tears came into her eyes, once so bright and brilliant, now always, as it seemed, with a shadow lurking in their depths.

" Oh, Carlo mio," she murmured brokenly. " If

we had never met, or if, having met, I had never grown to love you, this would never have been. But it is too late to think of that now. I have chosen, and I dare not turn back."

Alas ! she spoke truly when she said it was too late. Two days after her interview with the hunchback she had sent for him, to inform him that she was ready to pay the price which he had stipulated for. On leaving, he had informed her that he was known as Mattelli, his mother's maiden name. For his present purposes, it was inexpedient that he should use his proper patronymic.

" I have thought it all over ; my mind is made up," she told him, speaking in a cold, hard voice. " Take me out of the clutches of this viper and I will do what you wish ; I suppose you are no better than this Englishman, if one reasons over it. But you seem to have some kindly feeling, some heart. That callous beast has neither."

The hunchback's brilliant eyes dwelt upon her with a sombre expression.

" I would spare you if I could, poor signorina, but it is not in my power. We have plenty who come to us willingly, for the sake of reward. Why should we coerce the unwilling ? But I am only a humble servant of the vast organisation I serve. Salmon is my master ; I have to carry out his instructions."

" You will make the best terms you can for me ? " she asked, with a catch in her voice. She knew that this strange creature had a warm feeling for her, because she resembled his dead daughter. " The only thing I ever loved, the only thing who ever loved me,"

he had explained to her pathetically at their first interview.

"I will do that," he had answered, and his voice bore the ring of sincerity. "I am allowed, occasionally, to use my own discretion. I shall say that it is with the greatest difficulty I have induced you to consent. The only terms you will agree to are these. We obtain that letter from Blunden, paying him his price for it. In consideration of that, you will give us your services, serving the cause faithfully for twelve months, giving it of your best, sparing no efforts on its behalf. At the end of the year you shall be at liberty to renew your contract or retire from the service, as you choose."

"And, until then, you will keep that letter."

"Can you ask?" said the falsely named Mattelli, with his melancholy smile. "Would the organisation pay you a thousand pounds—for paying it to Blunden is the same thing—without keeping a hold over you? A slower-witted man than Salmon would see that you could snap your fingers at him if he gave you that letter now."

"He will keep the letter in his own possession, I suppose?"

"That I cannot say," replied the hunchback evasively. "These are not details that are in my department."

They had talked a little longer, and then he had taken his leave.

"That, then, is settled," he remarked, as he held out his hand. "You belong to us for twelve months, serving us with zeal and fidelity. In a few days everything will be arranged. I shall call upon you again,

and show you a letter from this man in which he acknowledges payment for a certain letter purporting to be written by the Comtesse de Beville to the firm of Langston & Co."

He had called again, according to promise, and had proved to her that all present danger was past. And she had accepted the situation with a certain sort of dull apathy. Her secret was only known to those who would respect it, because she had sworn to serve them faithfully. At the end of twelve months her freedom of action would be restored.

Her career was assured, and she would keep her lover and her lover's faith in her. But every moment, since she had consented to the infamous pact, she shuddered at the price she would be called upon to pay.

The hunchback had been very frank in his explanations, and made clear to her everything, so that, by now, she had partly been able to put together and understand for herself.

Blunden, a member of the same organisation as Salmon, had told him of that incriminating letter, and they had worked together to involve her in a wide net of German espionage. Her cosmopolitan knowledge, her command of languages, would help them considerably. Salmon could get her engagements in any capital where it suited his plans to send her.

But, above all, they expected her greatest usefulness to come from her connection with Laidlaw. He might be reticent enough with a man, but a woman with whom he was so deeply in love, and possessed of more than the

usual attractions of her sex, could charm out of him many an important secret which could serve the enemy.

She had appeared to fall in readily with this suggestion when "Gobbo," as she always called him to herself, had impressed it upon her strongly, pointing out that it was in this direction where her energies were likely to be most profitably employed.

"It is a horrible thing to do, but I daresay I shall get used to it in time," she had said, speaking with assumed carelessness. "I must cultivate a keen interest in politics and the war; we haven't talked much about these subjects yet. And then perhaps Carlo may drop something that I can communicate to you, and which will go towards paying off that thousand pounds."

She had laughed quite naturally as she said it. She had not enjoyed a stage training for nothing. Anyway, she completely took in the melancholy hunchback. Privately, he marvelled at the adaptability of women.

She did not think he was, personally, a very enthusiastic member of the service. In moments of confidence he had unbosomed himself pretty freely. He was a revolutionist and a Socialist by conviction. All wars were made by capitalists, and he was not greatly concerned which side won. This was a mere episode in the evolution of mankind. The great war was yet to come, and in that he would comport himself with fiery zeal—the war of the workers against their oppressors in high places. In the meantime, let this *canaille* go on destroying each

other. He served the side which paid him the most liberally.

Claudia was not very surprised at this kind of talk. Sometimes of an evening, when his day's work was done, the good old Beppo had indulged in the same sort of tirade, and it had rather bored her.

The hunchback had patted her on the back approvingly after that speech. "You are a sensible little girl, I see, and, after all, what does it matter? Work hard, and please the excellent Salmon. A year will soon go, and at the end of that time you will be free. You will marry this charming young man, and all these little episodes will be forgotten."

The philosophical "Gobbo" departed, and Claudia smiled as she recalled how readily he had been impressed. No doubt he believed she had no more conscience than himself.

For of one thing she had made up her mind from the beginning. She was going to set her own wits against those of the cunning devils who had entrapped her. She was not going to ensnare her lover. If she did get any information from him, she would twist and turn it about so that it would be of very little use when she had imparted it. Still, she felt she must walk warily, and practise the cunning of the serpent. They knew she was an unwilling accomplice, and they would keep a keen watch over her.

After digesting the circumstances, Miss Farrell had written to her. "I have puzzled over it all till my brain reels. Salmon's mysterious talk to you, followed so soon by the arrival of this blackmailer, cannot be due to mere coincidence. There must be

some design against you which I cannot fathom. Do take my advice and consult Mr. Laidlaw. Only a man can deal with these things. And if he refuses to believe in your innocence and uphold you against the world, his love is not worth having, and you will lose nothing by letting him go out of your life."

It was a difficult letter to answer. She dared not tell Maudie how she had escaped from the one trouble only to involve herself in this terrible conspiracy. Her friend, she knew, would have preferred death itself to purchasing her freedom at such a price.

She tore up three letters before she selected the one that seemed the most plausible. Every word of it was, of course, untrue. But, then, in such a terrible situation, to tell the truth was impossible.

She stated, very briefly, that, thanks to the good offices of Salmon's friend in Italy, the matter had been arranged. The financial arrangements involved would cripple her for quite a year.

It produced the impression Claudia had intended. Miss Farrell came to the conclusion that Salmon had advanced the money to redeem the letter, and was going to take a very handsome proportion of her earnings to repay himself. Probably the letter had been offered to him first, in view of his interest in her as a remunerative client, and he had preferred to deal with it in a more roundabout way that would bring him in more money.

Claudia's face burned when she closed up and sealed this letter, and she felt that she had descended

to the depths in suggesting such a false impression to the honest, straightforward English girl, from whom she must keep this second and more disgraceful secret of her life. But she was between the hammer and the anvil. She had made the compact, and by so doing had retained all that she had set her heart upon, and there was no going back.

For twelve months she must lead this horrible life of deception, full of bitter self-upbraiding. Only she must take care to do as little harm as she could, and match her woman's wit against theirs, so that she could fool them.

But her life was clouded ; even her lover's presence, his words of tenderness, could not bring to her the old rapture. Sometimes she wished that she had taken her friend's advice, and gone to him on the receipt of that telegram. But a moment's further reflection convinced her that she never could have screwed her courage to the sticking-point.

She raised herself from her reverie and began to put on her outdoor things. She must get back to the flat to see that everything was in readiness for the supper.

When just starting, a note was brought to her. The handwriting on the envelope seemed familiar, though for a moment she could not identify it.

On a small card was written in pencil, " An old friend would like to renew his acquaintance for a few moments."

Underneath was the name of Edward Langston.

She shuddered as she recalled the memory of the man who had been the cause of all this horrible

tragedy. Before she went to that accursed place she could have looked the whole world full in the face. And now!

"Show him up," she said, in a faint voice, and sank back in her chair, trembling and unnerved.

CHAPTER XII

CLAUDIA OUTWITS THE ENEMY

THE smiling, debonair man stood in the doorway, big, burly, and genial, the frank, open countenance a most untrustworthy index to the crooked nature that lay behind that smiling and deceptive front.

He advanced, bowing low, with an exaggerated air of humility and politeness. A feeling of disgust swept over Claudia as she remembered that not so very long ago she had thought him a rather fascinating personality.

"Have I taken a liberty?" he asked, in his bold, assured tones. "I have only been in Italy three days, and on my arrival I heard everywhere talk of the gifted 'La Bella.' Needless to say, I never connected her with a charming little girl who was once my assistant in a business of—well—not, perhaps, the most reputable character. Last night I went to the Margherita, and discovered that this new star and Claudia Erba were one and the same person. I could not be so near without paying my respects. But if my visit is unseasonable, pray dismiss me without ceremony. I am not a curmudgeon, and if you would like to kick me out I shall cherish no rancour.

I shall understand the situation. If I were living in Park Lane I should not care to receive all my old acquaintances, I can tell you."

She had no wish to kick him out—certainly not before she had asked him a few questions.

"Sit down," she said curtly, pointing to a chair. He was just as mercurial and unconcerned as ever, but he was not presuming on their old relations. For instance, he was tactful enough not to offer his hand. He sat down as bidden, and waited for her to open the conversation.

"You promised to send me that letter, Mr. Langston. Why did you not do so?" She was going to probe the truth of Blunden's story.

His face fell. "Yes, I promised, I know, and I ought to have done it. The fact is, I was in such a devil of a hurry to clear out, I couldn't find the time. But you got it all right, eh? I saw my brother before I left, handed over all the testimonials to him, and told him to destroy them, with one exception. That exception was yours. I gave him your address, and instructed him to forward it to you."

"You gave these instructions to your brother, Mr. Joseph Blunden. Your name is Langston, and I can only make out that you are the sons of the same father by different mothers. What is your right name, or his, for the matter of that? Or are they both assumed?"

Langston looked puzzled. "You know of him, then? To let you into a little matter of family history, both are aliases. If it will interest you to know, our real name is Johnson. My mother was an

Englishwoman; she died a few months after my birth. My father married a second time, an Italian woman, of mixed parentage. Joseph, my half-brother really, was the result of the second marriage. And Joseph sent you the letter, as I instructed him, eh?"

"No, that is just what he did not do," replied Claudia, in a choking voice. "He kept that letter back, and you were base enough to tell him my whole history."

The face of the man known as Langston assumed an expression of contrition. He was a rogue of a certain type, a pretty common type too, but it was evident he had his own code of honour.

"Joseph did that?" he thundered, and there was genuine indignation in his voice. He leaned forward, and would have taken her hand, but something in her attitude held him back. There was tragedy in her eyes and in her bearing, but for a moment she could not speak. Her unsteady voice would have betrayed her.

Langston rose and paced the room in a state of deep agitation. He was a rogue, but an angel of light compared to his callous brother.

"The dirty blackguard, if what I surmise is right," he cried, at length. "I can see by your eyes you have been in trouble. Did this cur use that letter to—to——?"

He paused. In his righteous wrath, he stumbled over the atrocious word. Claudia supplied it.

"To blackmail me. While I was obscure he let it lie amongst those useful little bits of paper which

I daresay he has accumulated by the dozen ; when I made my small success at the Margherita he fished it out, and paid me a visit at my flat."

Edward Langston clenched his big fist and shook it in the air. In his own particular walk of life scruples had not troubled him much. But he would have starved rather than have done a thing like this.

" If I were to come across him to-night, I think I should strangle him with these hands, half-brother though he is. To blackmail a woman, a harmless, defenceless woman, because he thinks she has made a bit of money ! And to betray me—I, who have helped him out of many a tight corner."

In spite of her misery, Claudia could hardly repress a wan smile. Blunden's money was tainted enough, but Langston's could never have been too clean.

He sat down again after this outburst, and looked at her with the wistful, humble air of a dog seeking forgiveness of its offended master.

" To hurt a hair of your dear head," he said, and there were tears in his eyes. " Why, little girl, I fell in love with you from the first moment I saw you. Half a dozen times I was on the point of asking you if you could care for me. And do you know why I always held back ? "

She ought to have hated him ; she did hate him, she felt sure of that, for all the misery her acquaintance with him had brought in its train. But her voice was less hard as she answered, " No."

" I will tell you. Rogue and scoundrel as I am, although of a different kidney from my precious brother, I had always hidden away somewhere a little

particle of decency. I always said that if ever I married I would pick out a woman who was as much an adventuress as I was an adventurer. Then the pot couldn't call the kettle black. But I would have counted it a dastardly crime to ask an honest woman to be my wife."

There was a bit of good in him, after all, she thought.

"I think at that time, Claudia, you rather liked me, up to the day when I showed my cards a bit too plainly. You don't know how often I've worried over persuading you to write that letter. I daresay, under similar circumstances, I should do the same thing to-morrow. But I know it went against the grain; you only did it because I told you it would help me so much. Oh, my cursed idiocy in trusting it to that cur! I ought to have known him better. But I didn't suspect even him of such baseness, although I had proved him to be pretty 'low-down.'"

"Don't let us talk of it," said Claudia hastily. It seemed treason to her honest English lover to allow this man to refer to his own feelings for her at that time. "I was a fool, and I have had to pay for my folly. Your brother took care of that."

Again Langston clenched his big hand, and an ominous look stole over his handsome, sensual face.

"Has the dog bled you for much, and will you tell me where I can find him?"

"He disappeared as soon as he had levied his blackmail. Is a man of that type likely to leave his address behind him?" asked the girl with a mirthless laugh.

Langston growled and muttered to himself for some time. "I have not heard from him from that

day to this. If I met him to-night I should kill him. If I meet him later, I will not stop at breaking every bone in his body. You haven't told me what he rooked you for."

"A thousand pounds, neither more nor less."

Edward Langston gave vent to a low whistle.

"And you paid it? Why did you not go to a solicitor? The police might have found, or known, something that would shut his mouth."

"There was no time. I was threatened with instant exposure if I did not find the money within a certain time. My career would have been ruined; and there was another reason."

"Another reason," repeated Langston, and a jealous look came into his eyes as he looked at the fair young girl whom he had coveted those eighteen months ago, whom he coveted even more intensely now, in the hour of her supposed triumph.

A tell-tale flush rose to her cheek under his searching gaze. "There is someone I love very much, a well-born, upright English gentleman, who loves me in return. Exposure might have separated us."

The jealous look died out of his face, giving way to an expression of infinite sorrow and pity.

"I understand, little girl," he said in a low voice. "I am glad you have met one who loves you, as you deserve to be loved. And it is I who was the cause of all this." After a pause, he added, "You were not sure that your lover would believe your explanation, and you could not make up your mind to run the risk. It might have been wiser to do so, nevertheless."

He agreed with her friend, Miss Farrell, but Claudia

could not yet admit to herself that they were right. There was always the risk of his not believing, and it was too great. Langston was a rogue, Maudie was a romantic young woman. They could not apprehend the complexities of a fastidious nature like that of Charles Laidlaw.

"And how did you find the money?" he asked presently. "Your success, good as it is, has not been established long. And a thousand pounds is a big sum."

If there was one man in the world to whom she could have been brought to speak freely, it was to Edward Langston. She need expect no severe critic in a person of his low standard and lack of ordinary scruples.

But even to him she could not confess the part she had undertaken to play. Even he might fail to understand how sorely she had been tempted. She gave the same sort of evasive explanation that she had given to Miss Farrell.

"I managed to get it, at a heavy price. It means that I have mortgaged my future for twelve months. At the end of that time I shall be free."

If examined strictly, the words were not absolutely untrue in themselves. She *had* paid a heavy price, she *had* mortgaged her future, but she did not say in what way. And Langston put on them the construction that she intended he should.

His face cleared a little. "Perhaps you took the wisest step, after all. Set a thousand pounds against the loss of your career and your lover, it is but a trifle in comparison."

It was some time before he spoke again; it was evident he had been thinking deeply.

"Look here, little woman, I'm a bad lot, I admit, especially in questions of commercial morality. But many men, who are highly respected now, have in their time played the same little tricks at the start. I swear I have stopped at that. I haven't been a blackmailer, I haven't actually robbed, I haven't forged—that little matter of the testimonials was hardly forgery."

Claudia could hardly forbear a smile at his special pleading. It all seemed very Jesuitical. He was only not a criminal, in so far as he had kept on the right side of the law.

He noted her smile, and a dull red crept over his handsome features.

"I feel I'm talking bosh, but I want to prove that I am not an utter scoundrel like my half-brother. What I really want to come to is this. Since I left England, I have had a lot of luck, and have got quite a tidy little pile put by. I'm not sure, in the future, I shall not run absolutely straight, and avoid anything shady. To a man of my temperament it won't be quite so exciting, I daresay."

"I'm afraid your little pile, as you call it, hasn't been come by very honestly," interrupted Claudia.

"No use going into that," he answered hastily. "Anyway, there's nothing I could be pulled up for. Now, your trouble is due to me, and it isn't fair that you should pay while I have money. I want you to accept that thousand pounds from me, plus any interest you will have to pay for it. I don't care if

it is a hundred per cent. I can never forgive myself but, if you do that, I shall feel happier in my mind. And, as it has all blown over, you will really be none the worse. Of course, you have had the letter back."

"The letter is safe," she said, in a low voice. Of course, he would assume that it had been returned to her, and she had destroyed it.

"That's all right, then. Now, you will do this to oblige me, and take a load off my mind? I ask it as a favour."

For the first time during their interview she softened a little to him. He had done her a grievous wrong, but to him the offence was a venial one, a justifiable trade trick, and she remembered that she had not considered its real significance at the time.

Anyway, he was trying to make amends, and it was a proof that he had some redeeming qualities. She sighed deeply, while he waited anxiously for her answer.

If only he could have come at the right moment, just before she had made up her mind to invoke the assistance of "Gobbo." That thousand pounds, which he offered too late, would have saved her.

But she knew, after a second's reflection, that was a foolish thought. The threat of blackmail had been a blind. Their ultimate aim was to involve her in this vile conspiracy, on account of her connection with Laidlaw. Had she put the thousand pounds on the table, it would have been refused, and their real object disclosed. It was her services, not her money, they wanted. They had only worked for their ends in a roundabout way.

She hesitated a moment before she replied. It was

only right he should pay this money for such compensation as it could bring, even though it could not dissolve her fatal pact. But she hated to take a penny of the gold which she knew had been earned by trickery and scheming. Anything that came from such a source would bring disaster in its train.

"No, I cannot take it," she said at length. "You mean well, and I am sure you are sorry. I give you credit for that. But it would bring a curse with it. You brought me bad luck on the day I first put my foot in your office. I will have nothing more to do with you. Keep your money; I do not want it. The past is done with; I live only for the future. I wish I had never seen you. I do not want ever to see you again."

He rose and stood before her, the big, burly man, abashed and humbled, he who was usually so confident and boastful. He was a little puzzled at her attitude, but no doubt she was superstitious, like most girls of her class, and thought he would always bring her bad luck if she had any further relations with him.

"It is for you to decide," he said, speaking in a dejected voice. "I should have felt much happier if you had accepted. Well, my visit cannot have been a pleasant one; it has revived painful memories. But remember, I shall always be your friend. I will leave an address, where any communications can be forwarded to me. I have one old and real friend left in the world, and he will always know where to find me."

She smiled slightly at the suggestion. Of what possible use could Edward Langston be to her in the future? He was clever in his way, the small and dishonourable way of the petty trickster, but how

could he deliver her from the net in which she had been enmeshed?

"A time may come," he said doggedly, slightly resenting her contemptuous smile. He picked up the card which she had laid on the table.

"I had better take this; I sent it in so that you should know who your visitor was. But, for reasons you can guess, Edward Langston is dead. I am now known by my proper name of Edward Johnson."

He scribbled that and an address in London on a plain card, and handed it to her.

"Don't fling it away when I have gone," he urged her. "Keep it, in case of need. I hope, for your own sake, you will never want me, but if you do, one line will bring me to you. Good-bye, little girl. I never felt more miserable in my life than at this moment, when I cannot even ask you to take my hand."

His voice broke, and in another moment he was gone. He had not dared to touch her, or ask for her forgiveness. She was relieved when he went, but she did not hate him so much as when he had entered.

She looked at the card, in two minds as to whether she should tear it up or not. Then she put it in her pocket, and took it back with her to the flat. The chance was very remote, but some day she might need a friend, and be glad to turn in her distress to this man of stained life and low morality who was not destitute of some decent qualities.

She had to summon all her powers of dissimulation to meet Laidlaw with her usual cheerful demeanour. Once or twice lately he had rallied her on her want of spirits, and had inquired anxiously if she had any

cause of trouble. She must keep a better guard over herself. For the next twelve months she must wear a mask.

By the time she had reached home she had forced herself into a good semblance of her usual buoyancy and cheerfulness. When Laidlaw arrived, she received him with her old affectionate welcome.

They had a happy time together. He was in great spirits himself. Presently he let fall the reason. The Allies were preparing a great stroke against the enemy.

Gradually she got all the details from him ; he was too full of them to resist her coaxing queries, and he would have trusted her with his life. Besides, was she not an Italian, and did she not hate the enemy as much as he did, and pray for their downfall ?

Of course, she had an object in all this. She knew she could not play with her task-masters too long. She must give them some proof of her intention to observe the conditions of her compact.

And, as she reflected over what her lover had told her, she saw her opportunity. If she sent this information just as she received it, it would be of immense importance to the German Command.

She had very quick wits, and her hard training in her early years had sharpened them. They had grown a little rusty with comparative prosperity, but her present perilous situation had put a fresh edge on them.

She saw that, by altering a few details skilfully, she would render the information perfectly harmless—more than that, absolutely misleading.

The next morning she 'phoned to " Gobbo " at his

lodgings in an obscure position of the city that she would call on him at midday. She took with her a lengthy memorandum.

"I got this from Mr. Laidlaw last night," she told the melancholy Mattelli. "I jotted it all down after he left, so as to be sure of the details. There was a lot to remember."

The hunchback took it, and read it without any apparent emotion. He was evidently too detached a philosopher to be keenly interested in the work for which he was paid. But he admitted that she had done good work.

"Salmon will be pleased that you have started so well," he said quietly. "If you only bring off a *coup* like this once in six months you will have proved your value to the organisation. This will reach German Headquarters as quickly as possible."

"If I make a bargain I stick to it," said Claudia mendaciously. "Mind you, I don't say I like doing it, but it's got to be done. It was your price for getting me out of a hole."

The hunchback smiled his gentle smile, and patted her hand. "I never thought it was right to take advantage of you in that way. If you were willing to come for a living, like me, for patriotism, like Salmon, well and good. Not otherwise."

She went away very elated with her first act of espionage. If "Gobbo" were her sole taskmaster she thought she would have a fairly easy time of it. But she shivered a little when she remembered the sinister figure of Salmon in the background.

A fortnight later Mattelli rang her up, with an urgent

summons to come to him immediately. She found him in a state of great perturbation.

"Salmon is furious. The information is all misleading. It has nearly led to disaster."

Claudia knew that as well as he, but she opened her eyes wide in innocent surprise.

"But I could have made no mistake. I have a splendid memory. I jotted down all the details the moment he left."

He looked at her shrewdly, but he could see no signs of wavering. He formed his own theory.

"Mr. Laidlaw was too clever for you. He gave you false information on purpose—quite wisely, from his point of view. He didn't know, of course, that you belonged to us, but he feared you might be indiscreet. He will make a good diplomatist."

She had been ready with the same explanation if Mattelli had not forestalled her. She pondered deeply with an air of bewilderment on her charming face. "It must be as you think," she said finally. "But, speaking strictly between ourselves, I did not believe my Carlo was quite so clever."

"If he is as clever as all that he won't be much use to us," observed the hunchback, with conviction.

She was not slow to improve upon this expression of opinion. A few days later she sought him again, and told him, with every appearance of chagrin, that Laidlaw had seen through her attempts to pump him, and told her flatly that to no woman in the world would he reveal a diplomatic secret.

"He loves me well enough, I am sure, but doesn't trust my sex. He thinks we are chatterers, and can't

keep our own counsel. You will tell Mr. Salmon how hard I have tried, won't you? I'm afraid he'll have a poor opinion of my abilities," she pleaded.

"Gobbo" promised that he would transmit her message and apologies to her agent.

A week later Salmon wrote her a curt note to the effect that he had procured her an engagement in Paris, whither she was to proceed in ten days' time.

"You will there be introduced to several important people, and I hope you will do better there than you have done in Rome," he concluded.

She did not like the wording of that letter at all. It breathed an angry, perhaps a vindictive, spirit. Had he any suspicions of her, she wondered? If so, he could not prove them. And for the present she had kept her beloved Carlo clear of it all.

But, all the same, however skilful and resourceful she might prove herself, she knew she had a formidable antagonist to deal with in the great variety agent, who, unknown to the great mass of his clients, was a German spy.

CHAPTER XIII

MADEMOISELLE CLÉMENTINE

SALMON was a wonderful organiser. He had everything cut and dried for her. "Gobbo" called a few days after her receipt of that curt and angry note, and informed her of the arrangements. A snug little *appartement* in a semi-fashionable quarter of Paris had been taken for her, and an elderly servant engaged.

On the day following her instalment in her new abode, a Mademoiselle Lafelle, a great friend and sometime client of Salmon's, would call upon her and act as her social godmother in the French capital. The name was very familiar. She knew the names of all the variety stars in England and elsewhere. Mademoiselle Lafelle was a bright, particular one.

"I have heard her—twice in London, once in Milan," she exclaimed. "Is she one of the organisation?"

"A very prominent and influential one, I believe," answered the hunchback. "She is a close friend of Salmon's; he believes implicitly in her."

"But she is a Frenchwoman," suggested Claudia incredulously.

Mattelli shrugged his shoulders. He was a man of marvellous philosophic calm. He never seemed greatly interested in, or excited over, anything.

"Technically, I presume. What does that convey? You are an Italian, pure on both sides, and you are with us."

"For certain reasons which you know of," she said hastily. She had taken a great fancy to "Gobbo"; he was so kind and gentle and dreamy. He represented her taskmasters, but there was always about him an air of regret at having to appear in such a capacity.

"Of course, I exempt you as an illustration. Well, I am half an Italian on my mother's side, and my father was a Russian, also of mixed parentage. By the laws of heredity, I ought to spurn the German gold. But I accept it and work for them."

"Why do you accept it if you are a free agent?" she asked boldly. She was not in the least afraid of him, and she felt the man would never take advantage of any chance admission on her part.

"I accept it because, under the present accursed conditions of society, I must live on some capitalist or other. It matters not which, so far as my personal feelings go. I have a greater respect for the Teuton of the two, because he knows his business better; he is superior in organisation."

They were a strange pair. The man, who had no enthusiasm in his work, frankly pursued it for his livelihood; the girl, who had been entrapped through her tenderer sentiments, chiefly the fear of losing her lover.

Mattelli was addicted to wandering, like most men of profound and varied thought. Claudia recalled him to the point.

"Is Mademoiselle Lafelle really a Frenchwoman?"

"I should doubt it," replied Mattelli, with his slow, enigmatic smile. "We flotsam and jetsam of the population who live on our wits, or our small talents (excuse the suggestion), indulge in mixed marriages. If we are Catholics, we marry amongst Catholics—a Frenchwoman marries an Italian, an Austrian marries a Bavarian. Protestants do the same in their own religious circles. Obliging persons change their religion, sinking their spiritual scruples for the sake of a good marriage. We have striking examples of that in Royal alliances. The material usually conquers the spiritual." He ended on his usual placid but sardonic note.

Claudia smiled. "Gobbo" was quite delightful when he had no business on hand, when he could give free rein to his fancies. Her dear old father indulged in much the same kind of talk, but he lacked the mental virility of the hunchback.

"Due to these circumstances," pursued Mattelli, now embarked upon his favourite theme, "there is a floating population in all countries which belongs to it, and is yet not of it, a population which is destitute of so-called patriotism, of so-called nationality. And yet that is not quite true, because that floating population has a nationality of its own, far beyond the confines of any individual country—and the name of that nationality, the one and only one, is, in four words, the Brotherhood of Nations."

His eyes glowed, the distorted frame seemed, for a moment, to grow erect, as he delivered himself of these sentiments which were to him a religion. Then he remembered that he had given expression to his inmost

thoughts. Again the mask fell over the lean, narrow face, the face of deformity, and when he spoke again his tones were formal and precise.

"My theories will not interest you, dear signorina; but you have told me that your excellent father holds views of a similar complexion. I take it that he is a member of that greater Brotherhood which will ultimately rule the world."

Claudia shook her head gently. "My dear old father talks not so well as you do, but he talks by the hour. But he would never act, even if the occasion arose."

The hunchback looked disappointed. "Like all weak natures, he will benefit by the efforts of his stronger brethren," he said sadly. "Well, good-day, signorina; I daresay I shall see you many times before you leave. And I shall also meet you in Paris. I start about the same time as you do. There is some important business going on there, and the masterful Salmon has deputed me to superintend it. *Addio.*"

He was gone, this peculiar creature, active spy, and revolutionary idealist. He would always dream of the great day when the shackled and dumb masses would rise from their long enslavement, stretch forth their liberated arms, hurl emperors and tyrants from their thrones, and proclaim with an exultant voice the regeneration of man, the establishment of universal peace, and the great Brotherhood of Nations with one purpose, one ideal.

Claudia sighed when he left her. It was a beautiful, a splendid ideal. But it would never come to pass in her time, or in the time of her grandchildren. And yet,

the poor old, dreaming " Gobbo," how lovable he was, in spite of his eccentricities, his foolish dreams !

When the time came she made preparations for her journey. Salmon had been wise ; he had not allowed her to outstay her welcome in Rome. He would let her return to the scene of her early triumphs with fresh and greater laurels on her fair young brow. She recognised that he was a great agent—that he could nurse budding talent with the most sedulous care.

Why had she succeeded so quickly ? She often asked herself this question. Salmon had done much—of that she was assured—with his ingenious advertising, his insistence on the qualities of the wares he introduced. But there was something behind this.

Her voice was small, her talent was slender. She was level-headed enough to recognise that. She flushed, almost with a sense of mortification, as she recognised the real fact. It was not her voice, her small talent, that had won the plaudits of the Roman youths at the Salone Margherita ; it was simply her beauty.

Her beauty, her freshness, her charming personality that radiated over the footlights, her youth—these were her assets. The foolish, foolish public who, because an indifferent artiste was handsome, would acclaim her as a great one, they were to be pitied.

She would have liked to be both a beauty and a great artiste, like Yvette Guilbert and a few others. But this was not to be. She had to be contented as things were.

And a tender smile stole over her face as she remembered the one great event in her life. It was her beauty and her charm, not her talent, that had brought love

into her life—the steadfast and devoted love of her "Carlo mio."

From her lover she parted with feelings that were mixed. On the one hand, her life in Paris would be very lonely without him. On the other, she would have no reason to keep a watch on every word and action, lest he should suspect and question.

In her heart of hearts she would have chosen to have exiled herself from him for the twelve months of her infamous contract, till she could return to him free from that hateful slavery and meet his gaze with eyes as clear as his own.

"Heaven knows when we shall see each other again," he said to her ruefully when they bade good-bye to each other. "There is some talk of sending me over to Paris on a special mission; we should see each other then pretty frequently. But that is in the air, and, of course, it would be too good to be true. Then I hear from a side wind that I might be sent back to the Foreign Office in London to take up a decent post there."

"That would be better, Carlo; don't you think so?" Claudia suggested gently. Somehow she felt she would be more at ease in Paris without him.

"Much the better of the two, my dear little sweetheart. And if we married quite quietly, and lived in the same sort of way, the F.O. would not raise any disturbance. I shall work that for all it is worth."

"For all it is worth, Carlo mio," repeated Claudia, between the fond kisses that they exchanged. "Oh, I think it will be worth much."

Yes, Carlo in London, that was what she desired

above all things. He would be safer there, and removed from the malign influence of Salmon and his terrible organisation. At least, she hoped so.

She left Rome, and in due course arrived at Paris. She drove to the *appartement* which, she was assured, would be in readiness for her. A middle-aged woman, respectable in appearance, in spotless cap and apron, opened the door of the flat, and dropped a curtsey.

"Welcome to Paris, mademoiselle. Everything is prepared for you. A gentleman is awaiting you in the *salon*."

Claudia nearly fainted with fright. She had received many visitors lately, and they had all brought disturbing influences.

Tremulous, with her heart beating fast, her knees knocking under her, she went into the small, elegantly furnished drawing-room, to meet the unexpected visitor.

She gasped as she recognised him—the big, burly figure, with the bald head, the carefully cultivated moustache, his usual geniality a little marred by a heavy frown—Salmon himself.

"I am surprised to see you," she faltered, not knowing what to say. "And you are such a busy man. How did you find time to get over here?"

He looked at her grimly. "This is the biggest business of my life," he said briefly. She noticed that his tone was not conciliatory. "All my other concerns may go to the devil for what I care. I came over here to have a word with you."

She recognised at once he was in a dangerous mood.

Her woman's wit came to her aid. She must disarm him. She approached him with a contrite air.

"Oh, Mr. Salmon, you are angry with me, I am sure; I gathered that from Signor Mattelli. But I did my best. I could not help it if I was outwitted."

He looked at her very steadily. "Are you sure you were outwitted?"

He was suspicious, then. She had gathered as much from "Gobbo."

She drew herself up with a certain air of dignity. "Mr. Salmon, you are very changed from the last time I saw you; your behaviour is quite different. Then you were a gentleman. Now——"

She made an eloquent pause, and flashed upon him an irresistible smile. She had heard that he was very susceptible. She would see what her good looks could do.

He softened a little under that subjugating influence. "If I could believe absolutely in your integrity," he muttered.

"Can you doubt it?" she asked, in a voice of the most transparent candour. "You saved me from ruin; you made it possible for me to marry, some day, the man I love. Am I likely to forget my debt to you? To be quite frank, I would rather have paid it in a different way. But I shall respect my obligations."

The suspicious eyes grew less hard; the man in him responded, for the moment, to the subtler wiles of the woman.

"Let us talk it all over in a friendly way," he said, and his voice rang more genially. "You made a

terrible bungle of that last affair. *Mein Gott*, it was near a disaster for our cause! You must have managed badly."

They had sat down by now, and were facing each other on opposite chairs. Claudia leaned forward, in an attitude of contrition, her hands clasped together.

"It was not my fault. I told Signor Mattelli to explain matters to you. Carlo was cleverer than any of us thought."

"Bah! He is not clever. A thick-headed, commonplace Englishman," cried Salmon, with true Teutonic scorn for the slow-witted island race. "If you had a bit of 'go' in you, you could have twisted him round your little finger."

Claudia would have liked to kill him as he sat there, lolling in the big easy chair; put an end to this blatant, insufferable personality. But, as she could not remove him in this summary manner, she temporised.

"This is all new to me, Mr. Salmon; please remember that. I shall acquire all the tricks in time. I cannot learn them all in a moment."

She bent again upon him that disarming smile, and the arrogant bully in him was temporarily softened.

"We will treat each other quite fairly," he said, after a moment's pause. "Act straightly by me and I will do the same by you."

She was on the point of flashing out that he had not treated her fairly, that he had entrapped her by his knowledge of a past indiscretion, which might be judged leniently or otherwise, according to the point of view. But it was no use angering him to her own detriment.

"I am quite prepared to observe my compact,"

she said, bringing to bear upon him her full battery of feminine charms, eloquent eyes, and tender smile. "But, Mr. Salmon, you must not expect the impossible. I am a novice at this game."

"I recognise that." He made the admission a little grudgingly. "But you have great powers of fascination, and, exercised on a man who is seriously in love with you, they should not fail. I have private information that Charles Laidlaw will be in Paris shortly on a special mission."

Her heart beat fast. Charles had told her it was in the air. This wonderful man, with his vast system of espionage, knew that it was decided upon.

"I shall expect you this time to get out of Mr. Laidlaw something that is really valuable. If you do that, I shall know you are dealing fairly with me."

Her gorge rose against him. This infamous scoundrel, the German who was masquerading as an Englishman, to talk of fairness! Why did not the words choke him as he uttered them? Why did not the earth open and swallow such a villain?

But her face betrayed nothing of her thoughts. Her lips continued to smile; her whole attitude was that of candour and frankness.

"Yes, I will do my best. But please remember he may be too clever for me."

Salmon rose. His mood was not easily discernible. He was not absolutely hostile; on the other hand, he was not quite friendly.

"Time will show, my dear signorina. A great friend of mine, Mademoiselle Lafelle, will call on you immediately. She is my trusted colleague. She will

show you the ropes ; she will introduce you to useful people."

" You will dine with me to-night, Mr. Salmon, surely. I don't expect anything is prepared here, but there are many restaurants in Paris where we can get a good meal."

For a moment Salmon hesitated. "The Red Ragazza" was very appealing, and her beauty was intoxicating to a man of his susceptibilities.

But he was bent upon business, not pleasure. Courteously, but firmly, he declined.

" Please excuse me," he said. " To-night I have important affairs on hand that brook of no delay. I am already overdue——"

He never finished the sentence. The French maid flung open the door and announced, " Mademoiselle Lafelle."

A beautiful young woman advanced with hands outstretched. Gait, gesture, and smile were marked by the indescribable charm of the Frenchwoman, a charm which is possessed in its perfection by no other nationality, so spontaneous, so alluring, so utterly free from self-consciousness.

" You are Claudia Erba ; I am Clémentine Lafelle. We are comrades in art ; let us do away at once with tiresome formalities. I shall call you Claudia ; you will address me as Clémentine. It is agreed."

The new-comer embraced Claudia warmly. She was a day before her time, evidently in a hurry to welcome her.

She turned towards Salmon as if she had just seen him, and held out her hand.

"The good Salmon. It is too delightful to meet you again. But you will run away and leave us for a little time. You are at the moment just a little *de trop*. I want to make the acquaintance of dear Claudia alone, *toute seule*, you understand, *mon ami*?"

Salmon evidently understood. He bowed and withdrew.

Mademoiselle Clémentine, as she preferred to call herself, drew out a cigarette-case, and handed it to Claudia.

"Let us smoke," she said. Her voice was clear and resonant as a bell, and her charm and beauty were compelling. "For myself, I cannot think unless I smoke. I cannot talk unless I think. And I want to talk to you very much. You are very beautiful, my dear. You will pardon my frankness."

Claudia blushed a little. "You can afford to find beauty in others. You are so very beautiful yourself. You need not fear comparisons."

Clémentine did not blush—she was too well accustomed to compliments. But it was easy to see she was well pleased with a tribute from her own sex. She smiled with that charming smile that the Parisian photographers had reproduced thousands of times.

"You are one of us," she said, as she blew the smoke of the cigarette through her dainty lips. "A member of the great organisation, or, rather, that branch of it presided over by our good friend who has just left us."

Claudia was getting inured to it by now. And some members of the organisation seemed very genial and pleasant. "Gobbo," in his quiet, quaint way,

was absolutely charming, and this delightful Clémentine was a woman she could take to her heart under normal conditions. Salmon was attractive, too, when he presented the best side of himself. And Lewis Levi, who was doubtless a member of the gang, was an agreeable personality.

She raised herself from her reverie to hear her visitor repeating her question, " You are one of us, Claudia ? "

She answered in a steady voice, with a smile as frank as that which met her own.

" Yes, Clémentine, I am one of you."

CHAPTER XIV

A WOMAN WITHOUT HEART

THE beautiful young woman nodded her head encouragingly. The avowal had not been made with any heartiness, but the lack of it did not seem to excite her suspicions.

"That is good," she said. "Well, my dear, you ought to do well. With beauty like yours, you should be able to twist the men round your little finger. That is where we women come in. We cannot do the fighting —the hard work of men. But we can wheedle and cajole. That is our *métier*."

She was evidently quite a frank person, and her opinion of her own sex did not seem to be a very exalted one.

She was a fascinating study, Claudia thought. She could not be much older than herself, and yet there was something about her that suggested an infinite experience, and that not of the kind that makes for good.

"You have found it easy to subjugate men, Clémentine?" asked the Italian girl presently.

A dazzling smile broke over the lovely face. "*Ma foi*, yes. I have found it very simple. And yet, if they knew that I am never attracted, that all their

admiration leaves me as cold as ice, I wonder if they would run after me as they do ? "

" Do you mean to say you have never loved ? "

Clémentine laughed that silvery laugh that rang as clear as a bell, but there was a note of disdain in it.

" Ah ! my dear, if you knew my life you would not think it had been one to encourage the growth of the finer feelings. What I have seen of love convinces me that it leads to misery. One can only be happy if one is without a heart."

Claudia gazed at her in amazement. Everything about her seemed formed for emotion and sensibility ; she was that most dainty and exquisite thing on God's earth—a lovely woman. Was it possible that she had been created without the faintest leaven of spiritual beauty to match her outward fairness—she who could dance with such grace that every posture and motion seemed the expression of perfect poetry ?

" Are you a Frenchwoman ? " asked Claudia presently.

" Only on my mother's side, and she was the daughter of a mixed marriage. Would you like to hear a chapter or two of my life ? "

" I should indeed," was the answer of the Italian girl, as she leaned forward eagerly, and bent her eyes on that beautiful face, that slender body that had never known the ache of a heart.

" My father was an Austrian, an adventurer and a blackguard. My mother adored him ; he repaid her with neglect and ill-usage. Many a night have I cowered by her side, listening for his drunken step, knowing the horrors that followed."

Claudia's face went pale. "Terrible," she murmured.

"Mercifully for her, she died soon, as much murdered as if he had run a knife through her heart. That was my first experience of that noble thing—a man. It was a good beginning, was it not?"

Claudia could say nothing. Her own youth had been hard in many ways, and she had never known her mother. But dear old gentle Beppo had been kindness and tenderness itself to the motherless child. The daintiest of their poor fare for her always; for himself he did not care.

"When she died, I was left to the sole care of this monster, who turned the innate savagery of his nature on me; starvation and blows were my portion. At twelve he sold me to a circus owner, only a few degrees less brutal than himself. I wonder they did not kill me between them. I must have been made of something more than ordinary flesh and blood to stand it."

Claudia looked at her with infinite pity. No wonder sentiment had found no place in her composition, after such a bitter experience.

"This beast died suddenly of heart disease, and the circus was disbanded. His widow handed me over to a dancing-master, a little less repulsive than the two who had hitherto been my masters. I am grateful to him for one thing—he was a splendid teacher, and he made me what I am. What I know of my art is due to him. But it was a hard slavery. I hardly ever had a penny for myself. He took it all—for the cost of my keep and education, as he used to say with an evil grin. Then he too died, and at last I was free."

She had been speaking, up to the present, in level,

unemotional tones. Suddenly she spread out her arms with a passionate gesture, as if some chord of feeling had suddenly been stirred within her.

"At last I was free, released from slavery—my own mistress. Not that my freedom was without drawbacks. I had no kith or kin, no friends. I had never been allowed to make any, for obvious reasons. I was taken advantage of, swindled by men who paid me starvation wages for the work that brought them in money. But I was my own mistress. What little money I earned was my own; I had not to account for every coin to the master who owned me. You never went through that experience."

"No," said Claudia. "I, too, earned very little at first, but then, you see, I had my father. He would not let them cheat me, although he was not much of a man of business."

"I should have stopped in the rut, I suppose, but for a lucky accident," continued Clémentine. The fit of momentary passion had passed. She spoke in the calm, detached tones of one relating the history of an acquaintance rather than her own.

"One night I was doing one of my dances that has since become celebrated; there are dozens of portraits of it about. It was at a miserable little fifth-rate café in Lyons. Salmon, the man who has just left us, your friend and mine, happened to stroll in out of curiosity."

"That was how you first knew him," cried Claudia swiftly. Clémentine nodded.

"It was a wretched show, of the cheapest and most miserable description. He told me afterwards that

he had never seen anything worse. My turn alone interested him, so he said. I had a talent which would bring money, if properly exploited."

He did help on struggling talent, then? It was what he had told her himself. But there was sure to be some sinister motive behind—personal gain or the benefit of the organisation.

"Mind you, Salmon is in no way different from other men in this respect, that self is always first. But, while I hate most men, of the two I rather like than dislike him. He is bluff and genial; I believe at times he might be capable of generosity. Anyway, he is not a brute, like the others with whom I had been associated."

Claudia had her doubts if he were not quite as much a brute, in a subtler way. But she made no comment.

"He waited till my turn was over, came round and introduced himself as the well-known variety agent. He had been much interested in my dancing. He thought he might be of use to me. Would I dine with him the next night and talk it over? Of course, I accepted."

She paused, drew a long breath, and lighted another cigarette. "I cannot talk for long unless I smoke," she declared. "To cut a long story short, we met, and soon came to terms. He was to push me for all I was worth for two years. During those two years he would take a portion of what I earned; but I am bound to say, under the circumstances, it was not an undue one. His terms were not like those of the other vampires who had ill-used and half-starved me into the bargain.

As far as I am capable of feeling grateful to any man, I think I am grateful to Salmon. He rescued me from poverty and obscurity, and made me what I am—Clémentine Lafelle, the well-known dancer, and the idol of the Parisian youth. Don't think me vain ; I have no vanity. I am only stating a fact. I daresay, in time, he will do as much for you."

She paused and blew a kiss to her new acquaintance who had listened eagerly to her recital.

" If he does, I shall not be jealous, I assure you. I am grateful to the excellent Salmon, but I do not love him. And my women friends, who know these things, tell me where there is not love there cannot be jealousy Besides, I am not of a jealous nature. I do not suffer from ordinary sentiments."

" But you have something still more to tell? " queried Claudia. " There were other relations added to those simple ones of agent and client."

The beautiful Clémentine indulged in a cynical grimace, if such a word could be applied to so exquisite a creature.

" Of course. Does a man ever do any kindness to a woman without a motive ? And have you ever noticed that the history of some unfortunates like myself seems to follow, always on certain prearranged lines ? I had all my life suffered from task-masters—two cruel, the third greedy. If I had, at that period in my career, found Salmon really different, *au fond*, from the others, I might have revised somewhat my estimate of men, and hated them less."

Always in her, thought Claudia, this one note, the hatred of the other sex—this lovely young woman

whose lips seemed made for kisses, whose smiles were formed to bless a happy lover. How she must have suffered, to have all her feminine instincts crushed out of her while only on the threshold of womanhood!

"In this apparently genial person, whose heart is not, I believe, absolutely bad, I found another taskmaster. He had made me, and he wanted me to show my gratitude by joining his organisation. What he was pleased to call my beauty would be so useful in such a career. Of course, one may say for the man, he is an intense patriot. Teutonism is a religion with him. He *has* offered himself; he would give up wife, children, all that was dear to him, to this devouring Moloch. To me it seems senseless. But then I do not pretend to understand patriotism."

"And you consented, being a free agent?" asked Claudia, in surprise.

"Yes, I consented, after a little hesitation," replied the famous dancer whose portraits were all over Paris. "My father, the Austrian, was a brute and a blackguard; my mother, half a Frenchwoman, was, so far as I know, good and virtuous. I was brought up amongst blackguards, the vilest scum of the earth. Such a training is not likely to foster scrupulous sentiments. But I think I do possess one virtue—my only one, I am sure—the uncommon one of gratitude."

Claudia was silent. She could not very closely follow the mind of this complex young woman.

"Salmon had made me. He had brought me all the material things—I had no yearning after sentimental ones—for which my rebellious youth had

craved. I was famous; I had plenty of money for clothes and jewels, to indulge in such of the tastes as I shared with normal women. I do not admit he had a right to demand it of me; he had made a good bargain out of it, on the business side, for himself. But it seemed to me it might be playing it a little low down if I refused. Besides, there was more money in it, and a spice of risk and danger that rather appealed to me."

She finished and rose, tossing away her cigarette.

"And you know me for what I am; I, who am to be your fairy godmother in this city, and to induct you into the mysteries of our craft. Heaven knows what I might have been under different circumstances. But I do not see what else I could have been with such a past."

She laughed lightly, and a cynical expression stole over the smiling, beautiful face.

"You see a woman without heart, without soul, destitute of sentiment, denied the capacity of loving. I love fame, I love power, I love money. A woman in form and feature, people tell me I am full of womanly charm, the fools. But behind all this deceptive appearance, there is not a single feminine attribute. I am so detached that, unlike the majority of women, I do not dislike my own sex."

She imprinted a light, cool kiss on Claudia's cheek.

"You will find me quite an interesting study when you begin to comprehend me. Now, we had better begin to make friends at once. Come round and see my turn to-night, and afterwards come to my dressing-room. We will go home to my flat for a little supper.

But I shall not be able to inflict any more of my unamiable sentiments on you, because there will be another guest."

"But surely you would prefer to be alone, especially if the guest is of the other sex," protested Claudia. She could hardly believe that her hatred of men was so genuine as she alleged.

Clémentine stamped her foot with pretended anger. "*Méchante*, have I not told you that I hate the other sex? No; you must come. The creature is a quite delightful young man, from the ordinary point of view, and adores me. He is rich, and highly placed. He would die of joy if I said I would love him. But I will not say it, and he grows thinner every day with despair."

Claudia still protested. She thought it would not be very lively for her if the delightful young man was so violently in love with her friend.

Mademoiselle Lafelle silenced her with an imperious wave of her hand.

"Silence! You will come! I command! And I am your superior in the organisation. Besides, it will be experience for you."

Clémentine laughed her rippling laugh. "Well, I will whet your curiosity for this once. Before you leave, you shall be——"

She made a long pause, enjoying the other's bewilderment.

"You shall be—— Oh, I ought not to tell you now, but let it come upon you suddenly. Well, I won't tantalise you any longer. Before you leave you shall be initiated in some of our methods, the

methods of the organisation. I will show you how we women play our parts in this great scheme."

She turned, and was gone, her light mocking laugh floating on the air, leaving Claudia bewildered and uneasy.

CHAPTER XV

AFTER SUPPER

CLAUDIA sat in the stalls, full of pleasurable expectation. The beautiful Clémentine Lafelle had interested her deeply, with her beauty, her strange *bizarre* nature. She had told her that she was a woman without a heart, destitute of every feminine attribute. And yet Paris, Paris the critical, pronounced her an artist. Was it possible that any woman could be a great artist if she lacked a soul?

It was the great turn. The lights were lowered discreetly, the orchestra sent forth its tender, wailing strains. Mademoiselle Lafelle glided on to the stage, her feet seeming to skim over the floor. She floated along in her exquisite poises, the limelight falling at every turn on the perfect face. Dreamy, spiritual, every gesture spontaneous and full of poetic suggestion, she held the big audience spellbound in the opening measures of her first dance.

But it was in her third and last dance that she reached the height of her exquisite art—that she secured the overwhelming plaudits of her critical but appreciative audience.

This was a small drama, condensed in the space of a few moments. In it, as the heroine she portrayed

the different emotions of tender love, swift jealousy, hatred, and, last, despair. As the poet depicts these varying emotions in words, the sculptor in marble, the painter with his brush, the musician in tones, so she represented them in the swaying movement of her eloquent limbs and still more eloquent gestures, which obeyed every impulse of the artistic temperament that informed them.

The orchestra finished with a great clash. And Clémentine Lafelle sank on the stage, falling slowly with the air of one succumbing reluctantly to a fate that had overwhelmed her, fighting with odds against which even her youth and beauty could not strive.

She had been exquisite all through, but she was more beautiful still, lying in that pose of surrender, that attitude of despair, symbol and expression of woman's weakness against the rude forces that encompass her.

Claudia was thrilled. She was easily moved by acting, by music; she had been impressed by the great canvases of the divine masters of her own country. But, as the plaudits died down, she thought she had never seen any art more perfect in its way than that of this beautiful woman, known as Clémentine Lafelle, the daughter of the Austrian father, the half-French mother, who had begun her career in a third-rate circus, to the accompaniments of starvation and ill-usage.

When she reached her friend's dressing-room, her eyes were misty with her emotion; she was trembling with pent-up feeling. She kissed her warmly.

"Oh, Clémentine, you are wonderful. I have

never seen anything like it. My dear, I cannot tell you how you thrilled me. The human voice, perhaps the violin played by a Kubelik, might have said as much to me, certainly not more. And you say you have not got a soul. Why, there was a soul in every movement, every gesture."

The beautiful dancer was quite cool and collected. Had Claudia received such an ovation and retired amidst those thunders of applause, her pulses would have tingled, her heart would have beaten to suffocation. There was not a trace of emotion in Clémentine's voice as she answered:

"When I dance I am in a state of subconsciousness. And, in those moments, the soul that was starved, or in a state of semi-animation, shows itself, to close again the instant the passing influence is over."

"Do you mean to say you feel nothing of the emotion, the passion you conveyed in those exquisite gestures and movements—why, it is only a few minutes ago?" questioned the Italian girl in amazement.

Mademoiselle Lafelle smiled her brilliant smile and stretched forth her hand. "Feel my pulse, little enthusiast. It beats as steadily as ever. As for applause, it moves me no longer. I have grown used to it. I never valued it in itself, only for what it brought in its train—the money to gratify my wants, to give me luxury. For I am normal in this, that I like to live softly, to feel that if I have a costly whim I can indulge it without thought of the morrow."

She laughed as she surveyed her new friend's puzzled countenance. "You do not understand me, little girl, I can see. You are of the warm-blooded kind,

full of emotion, born to love and suffer, and be betrayed. Yet you would not change places with me, I am sure."

Claudia shook her head. "Not to be like that. I would rather love and suffer than never love."

"Bah, you are a little simpleton. But be assured of this: I would not change places with you, not to experience all the delightful emotions you have crowded into your few years. Look you, my hard times are over; they are just nothing but a hateful memory. The world treated me vilely, and now it fawns upon me. I do not love the world any the more because it has changed its mind. It does not love me, Clémentine Lafelle; it only admires the dancer who gives pleasure by her art to its jaded sensibilities. If I failed to please it for a week it would drive me forth to beggary again.

"But it cannot do that," she added, after a brief pause. "I am one of the prudent ones. I have made a heap of money, and I am no miser. I grudge myself nothing in reason. But I have put by good sums for the rainy days. For they will come, my child; the days when others take the public fancy. Then, when the bouquets no longer fall, and my *blasé* admirers say I am going off, and managers are gruff and cold, I can afford to laugh at it all. My star has set; my day is over; then I turn to my little hoard for comfort."

She was decidedly a business-like young woman, thought Claudia, as she chattered away, with a note of disdain running through the clear, flexible voice.

Then suddenly her careless mood changed. Her face grew sombre.

"It was only common prudence to take the precautions, but I shall never need them. I shall not outstay my welcome, for the excellent reason that I shall die young, while the bouquets fall and the bravos ring in my ears."

Claudia could not repress a shudder. It was sacrilege to associate death with such a radiant creature, only just emerged from girlhood, so full of life and vitality.

"Why do you say that?" she asked quickly.

"Are you superstitious?" was the counter-question.

"Dreadfully," replied Claudia. She shuddered again as she remembered the omen of the cross-eyed flower-seller.

"Of course you are, being an Italian. Well, I share the weakness, too. Listen. When I was sixteen, my hand was read by a fortune-teller. She told me a lot of the past, a good deal of which I daresay she guessed. But, as to the future, so far she has been right. I should meet a man who would have a tremendous influence on my career."

"It was Salmon, of course," interrupted Claudia.

Clémentine nodded. "She foretold him all right. I should become rich and famous; that has all come true. For a long time she would tell me no more. But I pressed her, saying I was not afraid to hear of bad fortune as well as good. Then she told me that my line of life was extraordinarily short; that I should not enjoy my triumphs long. She did not tell me the exact age at which I was going to die: that, I suppose was beyond her powers."

She had been dressing rapidly during the brief conversation. Her toilette was finished, and she turned towards the young Italian with another lightning change of mood, her fair face wreathed in smiles.

"Let it come when it will, it will not find me afraid," she cried gaily. "But see, *ma chérie*, if you want to make much of me you must lose no time. If you delay, it may be too late. And now, good-bye to melancholy. Let us turn our thoughts to supper. I expect we shall find my adoring Alphonse has arrived before us."

They drove to the dancer's luxurious flat. Clémentine was right when she said that she did not begrudge herself anything in reason. The furniture, every piece of which she had chosen herself, the decoration, the details of which she had planned, expressed a fine artistic sense. She might have no soul, as she avowed, but she had acute sensibilities. Her dancing suggested as much; her home proved it.

A gentlemanly, good-looking young man in the later twenties, dressed faultlessly, was standing by the fireplace of the dining-room as they entered. The table, covered with exquisite linen, rare glass, old silver, and a profusion of beautiful flowers, was laid for supper. On the sideboard stood bottles of hock and champagne.

The young man's eyes lighted up as they rested on the object of his adoration. He bowed low and kissed the fair hand that his hostess extended to him.

"I said you would be here before us," she cried. "This is my friend, Claudia Erba, who has come to take Paris by storm. You will have the delight of

hearing her very shortly. Her agent, who is an old friend of mine, has put her under my care. She is alone to-night, her first night in the city, so I made her come along. Now we must run and take off our wraps."

If Monsieur Alphonse—Claudia did not learn his other name till some time after—might have been somewhat disappointed, he had the good breeding not to show it. He murmured something graceful, with the innate politeness of a Frenchman.

"He will hate me for being in the way," said Claudia to her friend, when they were removing their cloaks.

Clémentine shrugged her shoulders. "He is used to it, my dear. I very rarely allow him to enjoy my society alone. He would bore me too much with his protestations. A third party forces him to keep a check on himself. If I had not come across you I should have invited somebody else. The poor Alphonse must gaze and admire, without voicing his thoughts."

"But, if he bores you, why do you not give him his *congé*?" asked Claudia. Was it possible that the beautiful Clémentine took a feline pleasure in harrowing the feelings of her male victims?

The dancer smiled enigmatically. "*Ma foi*, if it only rested with me I would soon show him the door; he is so serious and boring. But he is a person of some importance, and it is necessary to cultivate him. Do not be impatient. Wait a bit and you will see a little comedy unfold itself to-night."

"Tell me," said Claudia, a smile breaking over her face as she recalled that row of bottles on the sideboard. "Is Monsieur a very thirsty person?"

Clémentine nodded. "Very. I don't expect he will

consume all I have had put out, but I like to give him a choice, and you will find he will show considerable capacity."

They went in to supper. Claudia had not yet learned his surname. She addressed him as monsieur, and he called her mademoiselle. The hostess and he called each other by their Christian names.

Claudia was a little disappointed in him. He did not talk much. He was evidently a very serious person, lacking the usual vivacity and ease of the Frenchman. His manners were more those of the Englishman who finds himself in strange company.

Clémentine was brightness itself. Her sallies were frequent, her light, infectious laughter filled the room. Monsieur Alphonse smiled at intervals, but his smile was always a grave one.

Perhaps he was disconcerted by the presence of a third person. But Clémentine had said that he was tiresome. Certainly he had the seriousness, the composed air of a man of fifty.

He ate heartily, partaking of large portions of each dish. Claudia also noticed that he drank deeply. The maid who waited was always filling his glass.

But he did not seem affected. When they rose from table his gait was perfectly steady, his voice quite clear. He evidently possessed a seasoned head.

They went into the *salon*. Clémentine proposed they should play cards. After the game had proceeded for a short time she rose.

" I expect you are thirsty, Alphonse ? "

His face flushed a little as he saw Claudia's eyes rest on him for a second. To the abstemious Italian girl it

seemed horrible that a man who had taken so much at supper should still be suffering from thirst.

"If it is not troubling you, if I may be permitted," he answered in a voice that had in it just a note of shame-facedness.

Clémentine left the room and returned quickly with a small bottle of champagne, which she had opened in the dining-room, and a glass. She poured out a portion of the creamy, frothing wine.

He applied himself eagerly, draining it at a single draught. Whenever he thought Claudia's eyes were not on him, he helped himself steadily. Clémentine did not appear to notice.

Ten minutes had passed, and the champagne bottle was empty. A quick, alert look came into the dancer's brilliant eyes.

And suddenly Monsieur Alphonse rose, a peculiar vacant expression on his face. He swayed a little, and one hand gripped the table in his endeavour to steady himself. His eyes closed.

Clémentine swiftly wheeled up an easy-chair behind him, loosened his hand from the table, and pushed him into it. The head of the immaculately dressed Alphonse drooped on his breast. Apparently he was lost to sight and sound.

Claudia recoiled from the painful spectacle. In England, when she had passed a reeling man in the street she had been terrified.

"How horrible!" she exclaimed in a voice of disgust. "He is intoxicated, Clémentine."

"No, my dear Claudia, that is just what he is not, though to-morrow he will think he was. He has taken

a good deal, I know, but not enough to affect a man of his capacity."

"Then what is it? Is he ill?"

Mademoiselle Lafelle's lips curved with a smile that was half amused, half contemptuous, as she surveyed the unheroic figure huddled in the easy-chair.

"He is not intoxicated, and he is not ill in the sense you mean. In a couple of hours he will revive, feeling somewhat shaky, and will implore me to forgive him for his unpardonable conduct."

The true meaning of it all began to dawn upon Claudia's puzzled understanding.

"You have—you have——" she stammered.

"We won't speak very loudly for the next few minutes. Yes, my dear, you have guessed right." She mimicked the other's surprised accents. "I have—I have—*drugged him*."

CHAPTER XVI

THE PROPHECY

THERE was an intense silence for a few moments, only broken by the heavy breathing of the unconscious Alphonse. Clémentine rose and lifted up the empty champagne bottle.

"We must remove all traces, so that his suspicions will not be aroused when he wakes up," she said calmly. "I will presently substitute another one for it. It would not do for him to take it away and have it examined. A chemist might find something."

Claudia—"The Golden Catspaw," as Salmon had once called her when speaking with one of his German friends—said nothing. She had taken a great fancy to Clémentine for her gaiety, her beauty; but she had a feeling of repulsion on discovering to what depths of infamy this lovely piece of womanhood could fall. She could forgive Salmon the more readily of the two; he was a Teuton and a patriot, and thought the end justified the means.

But Clémentine had some French blood in her; on the mother's side not much perhaps, but enough to make her shrink from such tasks as these, and yet she seemed to apply herself to them with a kind of amused indifference.

The dancer, no doubt, divined what was passing in the girl's mind, for she spoke gravely, and not without a certain compassion.

"You are upset, *ma chérie*, I can see. Well, I had a little repugnance myself at first, but it soon passed away. You see, my father was a blackguard. I hated him, but I daresay he transmitted the criminal taint. And my youth was passed with blackguards, who would stop at nothing to secure their own objects. Well, after all, I have not hurt the poor Alphonse much. It may be a turning-point in his career. When he reflects over things to-morrow, he may resolve to renounce drink for the rest of his life. Well, excuse me for a moment. I must go and arrange things, so that when he comes to, he will think it was really intoxication."

She walked lightly from the room, carrying the empty champagne bottle in her hand. She went into the dining-room, and took a careful survey of the bottles, full and empty. She had instructed the servant, a confederate, beforehand, not to remove any.

The consumption had been moderate, considering the powerful assistance of Alphonse; one bottle of hock, two and a half bottles of champagne. She had drunk three or four glasses of the sparkling wine; Claudia, protesting much, a glass and a half. Neither of the women had touched the hock.

The beautiful spy had made a rapid calculation. Obviously, Alphonse had not absorbed enough, for a man of his practised capacity, to produce such a rapid overthrow of his faculties. Not quite two bottles of light hock on the top of such a substantial meal was not likely to reduce him to that state.

When he recovered from his stupor she intended to bring him into the dining-room and confront him with the empty bottles. He would still be a bit dazed, as the drug she had administered had something of the after-effects of alcohol. But she was an artist in these matters. She liked the details to be perfect.

She went into the kitchen, carrying with her a bottle of hock, a bottle of champagne, and the half bottle that had been consumed in the *salon*.

"Give me three empty bottles of the same brands," she said to her maid, "and put these back."

The maid handed them to her, and she returned to the dining-room, placing the empty bottles where the full ones had been.

She surveyed her handiwork with the satisfied air of a successful actress who feels she has played her part well in a brilliant comedy.

She hastened back to Claudia, amusement playing all over her expressive features. She seemed to be thoroughly enjoying her rôle. Perhaps, to her peculiar humour, it seemed a justifiable revenge for the many occasions on which he had bored her to extinction.

"I have arranged everything," she exclaimed calmly to the startled Claudia. "When the excellent Alphonse wakes up in about two hours' time, and wonders what has happened to him, I shall take him into the next room, and point out to him the evidence of his indiscretion. He will be crushed to the earth, for he is very sensitive about his weakness. He will go on his knees to implore my pardon; I am not certain he will not weep. And he will be desolated

to think he allowed himself to be overwhelmed before a stranger."

She ended with her rippling laugh. There was no longer any risk of disturbing the unconscious man. And Claudia said no word of reprobation. She only shuddered inwardly as she remembered that these were the sort of people with whom she would have to associate for the twelve months of her infamous compact. It would be impolitic, perhaps dangerous, to show her disgust.

And, what made it worse, Clémentine had been a free agent. She had not been compelled, like herself, to barter away her freedom, her moral scruples, in order to gain security.

"And what was your motive in drugging him?" she asked at length, when she could make her voice natural.

"I had private information that he was attending an important meeting to-night, and that he would come from it straight to me. It was more than probable that he would bring away with him some memoranda that might be of importance to us. In a moment it will be my task to find if that surmise is correct or not. That is where we women come in useful at times."

She rose and went towards the unconscious man, undid his coat and felt in his inner pockets. She drew forth a letter-case, from which she extracted two small sheets of paper covered with small hand-writing.

After a hasty perusal she replaced them in the case, put the case back in the pocket, and re-buttoned

the coat. When he woke up he would never suspect that he had been searched by those deft hands which he had so often covered with kisses.

"If he had been a wise man he would have gone home and put those papers safely away. He was so anxious to see me that he begrudged those few minutes. He was foolish because he was in love, and in love with a woman who despises men. Am I not to be envied, Claudia, in this respect, that I am incapable of love? In that case I might be as foolish as he."

Claudia sighed. "Perhaps you are right," she murmured. It was the love, the fear of losing her lover, that had driven her to accept Salmon's terms. She knew she would not have yielded otherwise.

Clémentine noticed that a constraint seemed to have fallen upon her guest since the enactment of that little comedy, as she called it to herself. She displayed her usual unerring tact.

"You are tired, my dear little friend, and a trifle upset by the sight of our poor Alphonse, who does not, at the present moment, present a very edifying spectacle. You will be glad of a good night's rest. In the morning I expect you will be able to smile over the incident as I am smiling now."

She kissed her, and Claudia returned the kiss. Clémentine had evidently taken a fancy to her, and she was hand-in-glove with Salmon. She was a person to be propitiated; she must dissemble and hide her repulsion as best she could.

"I will call some time to-morrow," the dancer promised, as they stood together in the hall. "But, stay, there is one thing I am a little curious about.

Why did you join us? Do not answer if you would rather not; it is perhaps an impertinence on my part. I suppose, as in my case, money was a powerful inducement."

Claudia looked surprised. Surely this young woman, whose art was so highly paid, had money enough without stooping to procure more from such a source?

Clémentine interpreted the thought. "I am terribly avaricious, my dear. Money is the one thing I worship with my whole heart and soul; it would be too painful for me to refuse when it is earned so easily. And about my little question. You would rather not answer it, eh?"

"Salmon has not told you, then?"

"Salmon is always as close as wax," was Clémentine's answer. "I don't think he ever reveals anything except he has a purpose in view. If he had told me I should not have asked you."

Claudia's face flushed painfully. It was easy to refuse to answer. But she felt irresistibly impelled to confide in somebody; at least to an extent. And somehow she felt that Clémentine would not betray her confidence.

"There was a secret in my past life that had come to his knowledge," she explained in faltering tones. "I will not tell you what it was; there were extenuating circumstances, but one cannot always tell what another person's judgment may be. Unless I joined his organisation, he threatened to reveal that secret."

"To your lover, of course," said Mademoiselle Lafelle, with a woman's swift intuition.

"Yes, to my lover," admitted Claudia, in a choking

voice. "Yes, but for my love I would have refused."

There was a soft look in the brilliant, dark eyes as Clémentine laid her hands gently on the girl's shoulders.

"I see. He entrapped you, in a word. It was a little base, yes; I would not have thought him capable of it. But, then, he would stoop to anything for the cause; in that direction he is a fanatic. So you come to us unwillingly. You do not like the prospects of the new profession?"

"I shall pay my debt," answered Claudia guardedly. She could not entrust her inmost thoughts to the close friend and emissary of the German who called himself Salmon.

"With all his cleverness, I think he has not made a good bargain," said Clémentine shrewdly. "Willing recruits are good enough, but not forced ones. If you have no heart in the work, you will not develop much zeal."

"Have you much heart in the work?"

The dancer laughed merrily. "The whole thing intrigues me immensely; this double life. And it flatters my sense of power. I love to know that I can bamboozle men and outwit those who think they are clever, like that poor, stupid Alphonse, lying inert in the easy-chair. Well, good night. Till to-morrow."

Claudia passed a restless night, but with the daylight things looked less horrible and repulsive, as Clémentine had predicted. Anyway, there could be no drawing back on her part. She must follow where fate, or, rather, the vile machinations of her taskmaster, led her.

A week later she made her début on the Parisian

variety stage. She had sung in Paris before, but at minor halls.

She was undoubtedly a success; but she did not create a *furore* as she had done in Rome. Then, she was an Italian, and the Italians would naturally be biased in favour of their own countrywoman. Still, the critical audiences of Paris set the seal of their approval on her. She was a " star " in both capitals. She had left London, humble and obscure; she would return an artist, acknowledged by the acclamation of two great capitals.

She saw much of Clémentine, and her liking for the woman overcame some of the repulsion she felt towards the adventuress and the spy. Mademoiselle Lafelle was engaged in much apparently unobtrusive but far-reaching propaganda. She professed to know little about politics. She loved France, but she could not altogether hate Austria, the birthplace of her father. Was it necessary to keep on this hideous war? Could not diplomacy step in and end it?

She would wring her slender hands and weep over the terrible waste of human lives, and bewail the obstinacy of statesmen who encouraged such blood-lust. Why not a separate peace for them, and leave the other wrangling nations to fight it out?

She put it all in her artless, gentle way, her lovely eyes misty and suffused with emotion. It was the rôle of the beautiful woman to impress, to influence, to cajole. And she enjoyed playing her part. She loved acting as much as dancing.

And then there came to Claudia a disappointment, although, after the first shock had passed away, she

experienced a feeling of relief. Laidlaw had written to her that he would be in Paris on a special mission in a fortnight.

Her heart beat wildly at the prospect of their reunion ; she counted the days to their meeting.

And suddenly, a week later, the blow fell. A hasty note apprised her that his appointment had been cancelled almost at the eleventh hour. Instead, he was to proceed to London to take up a position at the Foreign Office.

" Fortunately," he wrote, " this particular department is not presided over by my father. I think it looks like a permanent post. Well, dearest Claudia, you will soon be returning to England, with the glamour of your foreign triumphs over you. And the time will soon pass and bring me to the happy day when I can call you my own."

She kissed the letter many times and shed a few natural tears. But, on the whole, she was relieved. She hated to think of her honourable English lover meeting such people as Clémentine and " Gobbo " under the impression that they were her friends.

Salmon quickly altered his plans with regard to her. He had first thought of her in connection with Laidlaw. It was essential that she should be near him. She received an intimation that her engagement in Paris would terminate by a certain date. When that expired she was to hold herself in readiness to return to England. She would have a month or six weeks' rest, and then he would procure her an engagement at one of the big London halls.

She felt very afraid. She had done nothing in Paris

except a very little feeble propaganda, at the instigation of Mademoiselle Lafelle. She had proved that, so far, she was a very useless member of the organisation. But, evidently, the relentless Salmon was not disposed to admit that he had made a bad bargain and let her go. And many months of her compact had yet to run.

Mattelli was announced one morning about a week before her departure for England.

It was very early ; she was only just completing her toilette. She went to him as quickly as possible, and found the hunchback pacing the small *salon* in a state of great perturbation.

It was difficult to rouse the "Gobbo" from his philosophical calm, but he was genuinely moved now. His long, narrow face worked convulsively, his words came in quick jerks.

"Paris is a dangerous place, signorina. The French have the finest Secret Service in Europe. It is getting far too warm here. You are leaving directly, and at the same time I shall disappear. Thank heaven, they have found out nothing about us. We have friends in many quarters, and they assure me of that. But we must preserve our skins."

Claudia turned pale. The dangers, as well as the repulsiveness, of her new profession, were brought home to her by those rapid utterances.

"I have bad news for you. You saw a great deal of Clémentine Lafelle. You were fond of her, were you not?"

"As a woman, yes ; she had a great charm."

"She has exercised it, I fear, for the last time," said the hunchback gloomily. "Late last night she

was arrested as a spy. She will be tried at once by court-martial."

Claudia sank back in her chair to prevent herself from falling. She trembled in every limb. And there flashed across her mind the prediction of the fortune-teller.

"You mean, you mean——" she gasped.

And the sombre tones of Mattelli answered her, "You have seen the last of her. There is no hope. She was taken red-handed, with the proofs of her guilt upon her. In merciful England they would never do a woman to death for such a crime. Foreign nations are different. A spy to them is a spy, whether a woman or a man, and death is the only sentence."

CHAPTER XVII

THE NET

THREE days later the hunchback called again. During the interval Claudia had been torn by anxiety. The acquaintance between her and Clémentine had been a brief one, but she had grown much attached to the brilliant young Frenchwoman, so cynical, so charming, so beautiful.

His sombre face told her the worst, without need of words.

"It is all over, my little friend. She was shot this morning, and she died bravely. She had the courage of a man in that slight body of hers."

Claudia gave way to a passion of grief when she heard her fears confirmed. In this supreme moment she forgot the adventuress, the woman who had taken up this base profession from her sordid love of gold, from some innate spirit of devilry—perhaps in obedience to some criminal taint transmitted to her by her blackguard father.

She preferred to remember the brighter side of the picture—the consummate artist, the beautiful woman, the charming personality.

She was only a year older than Claudia, and up to a few days ago she had the world at her feet.

The last bouquets had fallen, the last plaudits had

been given. Clémentine Lafelle was no more, and had met a shameful doom. She had betrayed the country which had nurtured her and made her the queen of her little world.

Claudia would never see her again. That graceful form, those exquisite limbs, were rigid in death. Those beautiful eyes were closed for ever.

Claudia shuddered with her terrible forebodings. Were her taskmasters leading her on to the same inexorable fate, the same shameful end?

Mattelli gave her some further details. The court-martial had been held at the Ministry of War. One of her judges had been a warm admirer of the accused, and had broken down during the trial. Hopes of pardon, or, at any rate, a mitigation of the extreme sentence, had been held out to her, if she would betray her comrades. She had thanked them for the offer, and refused with a proud smile. She had her own notions of honour, she answered them, although her code was different from theirs.

"It was a brave thing to do," observed Mattelli. Claudia fancied he had altered a good deal in those few tragic days, and she had never thought him the stuff of which martyrs are made. His manner had lost its old philosophic calm; he seemed haunted with forebodings.

"Yes, it was a brave thing to do," assented Claudia, in the midst of her weeping. "Life is sweet to all, but especially to the young."

The hunchback seemed to be engrossed with the subject, for he went on with the air of a man who was uttering his thoughts aloud.

" Nobody could say how they would act under such conditions, and, after all, physical courage is an accident. You are condemned to death, and marched back to your cold, dark cell. You know in a few hours the end will come, the sky and the sun and the earth will be blotted out. Life may not have been too sweet, but to young or old the thought of a violent death is repulsive. You are left alone with the thought of facing those rifles."

Claudia shuddered as he drew the gloomy picture. " Don't, don't," she cried, in a choking voice.

But Mattelli was too absorbed in his own fancies to heed that agonised cry.

" And then, while a prey to these awful thoughts, counting the swift moments that lie between you and death, you are suddenly tempted to buy your life by the betrayal of others. A few little words spoken, a few secrets revealed, and the sunshine is suddenly restored to you. You deserved to suffer, but you are free, and others who deserve to suffer as much as you take your place. All honour to Clémentine Lafelle for resisting the bribe and standing firm. She died bravely, staunch to the last, with a smile on her lips."

" Where was she executed ? "

" Inside the fortifications, close to the Boulevard Lefebvre."

There was a long silence. Then the hunchback, evidently with effort, turned away his thoughts from this terrible theme, and spoke of general things.

" Fortunately, our particular branch is not implicated, but our activities here are checked for some time. Your Parisian engagement will end in ten days.

Salmon's instructions are that you will then return to England, and see him at once on your arrival. I start for the same country to-morrow. He seems to think that is the immediate field for our energy."

Eleven days later Claudia had quitted Paris, a city henceforth of tragic associations, and arrived in London. It was still early—about six o'clock. She sent her maid back to Brixton with the luggage and went on to Camden Town to see Miss Farrell.

Her poor friend, Maudie, had fallen upon evil times ; what she was always dreading had come to pass. In the well-known slang of the profession, she was " out of a shop," and her agent did not speak hopefully of fresh engagements. The market was chock full of young women of the same sort of talent.

Of course, Claudia had made up her mind what to do. She had plenty of money in hand. She had saved something at Rome, and in Paris she had put by three times as much. She had settled all her plans. She was going to take a small furnished flat in the Kensington district. Beppo Erba need only work when it pleased him ; she would have preferred not at all. And Miss Farrell was to make her home with them.

The two young women embraced warmly. And, after a little preliminary conversation, Claudia made her suggestion. The tears came into Maudie's eyes as she thanked her warm-hearted friend, but at first she hesitated a little.

" I am not absolutely ' broke,' dear, for the moment. I have a few pounds in the savings bank—enough to carry me on for three or four weeks. I will wait till then. Something may turn up."

"You will do nothing of the sort," cried Claudia impetuously. "I am not going to leave you here to half starve yourself while I have plenty. What did I tell you that night we supped together at Luigi's just before my luck turned? I said that we were pals, and that meant one roof and one purse. I am going to take you back to Brixton to-night, just as soon as you can get your things on, for I am anxious to see the dear old papa. Tell your landlady; leave a note for the girl you live with. You can fetch your luggage to-morrow."

Miss Farrell still demurred, but her scruples were quickly overborne. Half an hour later they were in a taxi bound for the Percy Road.

Papa Beppo was not at all well. When questioned anxiously by his daughter, he admitted to feelings of faintness and lassitude. A great change had taken place in the old wood-carver during her brief absence. She resolved she would feed him up and forbid any work whatever.

In the evening she unfolded her new plans. She would see Salmon in the morning, meet Miss Farrell at lunch, and afterwards they would go flat-hunting in Kensington. In a week she hoped to be settled in their new quarters.

Maudie smiled at her friend's enthusiasm. Claudia was certainly coming out with a vengeance. Success and the applause of the public had evidently widened her outlook.

During a pause in the conversation reference was made to Charles Laidlaw, and Claudia explained that she had suffered a serious disappointment.

"I expected to find him in London before me. But

it seems they can't spare him from Rome just yet. He thinks it will be quite a month before we meet."

The next morning she went to Green Street. She had received a letter from Salmon at breakfast-time making an appointment for eleven o'clock.

Nobody was in the office but the clerk. The agent was disengaged. She was shown in at once.

His manner, she thought, was cold and reserved. He made a few indifferent inquiries as to details of her Parisian engagement. He did not allude to either the hunchback or the unhappy Clémentine.

When this topic was finished, he spoke rather abruptly.

"I will get you something good here in about a couple of months' time. A brief rest won't do you any harm. In the meantime I shall prepare the way by a little judicious paragraphing in the Press about your success in Rome and Paris."

This would suit her admirably. She told him of her intention to leave the humble abode at Brixton and take a flat in some more fashionable neighbourhood like Kensington.

He smiled approvingly, but his smile lacked the cordiality that had been exhibited on their first acquaintance. She felt that he was very much changed, that his attitude was one of veiled hostility. Mattelli had told her that he was furious at her want of success with Laidlaw. This was still rankling in his mind.

"You have, then, done me the honour to be guided by me in certain things." The tone was smooth, but tinged with a certain heavy sarcasm. "You agree

that when you have got to make your way in the world it is wise to keep up a brave show."

"I quite agree," said Claudia falteringly. Her feelings were akin to those of the lamb in the enforced society of the lion. She had an uneasy conviction that at any moment the lion, in the person of the masterful variety agent, might turn and rend her.

"You speak of moving," said Salmon presently. "How soon do you expect to get settled? You can change houses very quickly if you have got plenty of money."

"Thanks to you, I have sufficient of that." She thought this acknowledgment of what he had done for her in her professional career might placate him a little.

But he did not seem touched by the delicate compliment.

"Mr. Laidlaw is back in about a month's time, according to my information," was his next remark.

Claudia was startled. He knew as much from his army of spies as she knew from her private letters. She was dumbfounded by the subtlety, the power of the man.

"Yes. Why do you ask?" she cried. Ever she felt the cruel motions of the spider closing upon her, the defenceless fly who had been entangled in the cunningly weaved web.

"Only to enable me to arrange my plans properly," he replied with a grim smile. "You will move into your new abode in a week; I would prefer that you did not delay it longer. If money can secure expedition, I will advance any reasonable sum."

"I have plenty of money," Claudia flashed out in an indignant voice.

"All the better. Still you can rely upon me if there is a pinch." He went on, in a slow, meditative voice, "It is a month before Laidlaw's return; you will be in your new dwelling in a week from now. You will then have a clear fortnight in which you can go here and there, untroubled by questions or explanations—that is an important point to me."

She gazed at him, bewildered and afraid.

Clémentine Lafelle would have guessed what was passing in his mind, but, then, she had the spirit of intrigue that Claudia lacked. But he made his point clear to her in the next few words.

"I shall want you to undertake a little journey for me on behalf of the organisation to which you have pledged your services. You will be absent from England for a few days. Later on, your reward will be an engagement at the first music-hall in London, at a salary that exceeds what you received in Paris. I said I would make you; you must admit I am making you fast. I am keeping *my* part of the bargain."

"Is what you ask of me very difficult?" she inquired in a low voice. She could not look him in the face. If she did she would show her hatred and fear of him too plainly.

"Not at all difficult: rather a test of your courage and fidelity."

"Do you suspect my fidelity, then? Do you think I want to back out of the bargain I made with my eyes open?"

It was a brave attempt, and she backed it up with

the armoury of a woman's wiles—the ingenuous smile, the look of reproach in her beautiful eyes.

But it had little effect upon him, she perceived. She had once thought him susceptible to feminine influence. She had to revise her estimate of him in view of wider experience. Business was always the predominant note in his life; pleasure was ever expressed in the minor key.

"I will be quite frank with you, Claudia Erba. My judgment for the moment is suspended; I shall form a conclusion when I have more data to go upon. You failed us miserably in Rome and Paris."

"There was no chance in Paris. You surely do not forget the fate of Clémentine Lafelle?"

"I forget nothing, especially the death of that brave and lion-hearted woman." For a moment he paused; he seemed oppressed with tragic memories.

"I forget nothing," he resumed, after a pause. "You asked me a plain question, I give you a plain answer. As I said, you failed us miserably in Rome; for the moment we will leave Paris out of the question."

"I explained all that to Signor Mattelli," interposed Claudia hastily.

Salmon indulged in a gesture of contempt "A man useful in his way, subtle and wily. But full of sentiment at bottom. A child could gull Mattelli. Well, to come to the hard facts, as they present themselves to me. You were a failure, and were ready with excuses which struck me as being a trifle too plausible."

"You are unjust," murmured Claudia, in her best actress's vein.

Salmon looked at her sharply. "I am quite willing to give you the benefit of the doubt. It may have been the inexperience, the panic of the raw recruit; I am willing to make allowances for that."

He paused, and then added, in a voice of tremendous significance:

"And, on the other hand, your failure may have been due to something else."

She felt she could not stand up to him, this man with his subtle knowledge of human nature, who seemed to read her very soul, to apprehend and foresee every twist and turn of her feminine nature.

"Why not release me, if I am useless to you?"

"I will never release you," he cried in a hard voice. "You are mine for twelve months. I have made you, and have bought that letter which would have blasted your career and lost you your lover. I will keep to my bargain; but, by the heaven above us, you shall keep to yours."

"What is this service you demand of me, to test my courage and fidelity?"

"You shall know in good time. Go and make your arrangements. In a week from now you will hear from me. I shall ask you to come here, and I will explain the details of the mission with which I am going to entrust you."

"There is no more, then, to be said to-day?"

He opened the side door of his private room.

"There is no more to be said to-day. But these are my last words to you, and think over them well. Don't hope for a moment that you can hoodwink me with your woman's wit. Run straight with me; keep

your bargain, not only in the letter, but in the spirit. Believe me, you will rue the day that it ever entered your mind to play me false."

She went down the stairs with those menacing words ringing in her ears. She met Miss Farrell ; they lunched together. At the beginning of the meal she was silent and preoccupied. But in time the natural buoyancy of youth and temperament reasserted itself, and soon she was smiling and chatting gaily to her friend.

In other directions things worked smoothly. The first flat they looked over was the ideal one ; nothing could be better.

Within the week they were installed. And on the eighth day came a short note from Salmon. He wished to see her.

She went, and briefly and concisely he unfolded the details of the mission she was to undertake.

When he had finished she fell back in her chair, limp and unnerved.

" It is impossible," she gasped.

He rose and stood over her, grim and implacable. " Nothing is impossible in this service. And remember, I am doubtful of you. It is a test of your courage and fidelity. It is the price you must pay for the fortune I have brought you, the security I have given you. Refuse, and you know the consequences."

She realised that she was in a grip of iron. She must pay the price she had agreed.

She went back to the pretty little flat in Kensington, her brain in a whirl. She exchanged commonplaces with Maudie Farrell ; to-morrow she would have to

invent a lie for her prolonged absence, but Salmon had helped her there.

For one thing, she was devoutly grateful that her beloved Carlo was still in Rome. She could not have looked him in the face with this awful burden on her soul, the burden of the price she must pay for the thoughtless indiscretion of a moment.

CHAPTER XVIII

IN ENEMY WATERS

A FEMALE figure stood on the beach near Llandudno, under the shadow of the Great Orme. The night was dark and stormy. Heavy clouds rolled across the sky, the rain fell in fitful showers, the wind sighed and moaned.

Claudia Erba—for it was she—stood under the shadow of a rock, with her red flash-lamp in her hand. She had come to the first stage of her perilous journey, undertaken at the bidding of her imperious taskmaster.

She had travelled from Euston to Llandudno by the Holyhead express, which arrived at the junction at nine o'clock. It had been a long and tiring journey.

Secrecy being necessary to her operations, she had walked from the station to this lonely spot. Her only luggage was a small bag, in which were placed a few toilet requisites, and a sealed packet, containing papers, to be delivered to a certain person at Danzig, in Germany.

She was tired, fearful, and utterly dispirited. The task Salmon had set her was not proper work for a woman ; it was part of his punishment for her previous failure.

And there were private troubles weighing upon her

also. Three days before, poor old Beppo had been seized with a paralytic stroke, and the doctor had warned her that it was the beginning of the end. She had begged for delay, but Salmon was inexorable, and told her brutally the business could not wait.

The tide was coming in, and the low moaning of the waves as they broke upon the beach intensified her profound melancholy.

Obeying her instructions, she signalled out to sea, flashing her lamp four times. She was to signal thrice at intervals of two minutes.

Presently, in the darkness, to which she was becoming accustomed, she saw a collapsible boat glide slowly on to the sand. A tall German, wrapped in oilskins, advanced towards the shivering figure, hidden in the shadow of the rock.

"You have come from our good friend in London, Herr Salmon?" he asked, speaking in English, with a slow but clear accent.

Satisfied that she was the person he had been sent to seek, he conducted her to the boat, in which he bestowed her safely, wrapping a rug round her to protect her from the chills of the night air.

She was rowed out a little way and assisted on board a German submarine, the U 98. The commander, a bullet-headed young Teuton, received her and conducted her down below. Even in this intense moment of her novel experience, Claudia found herself wondering, with true feminine curiosity, if he had ever entertained a woman before under such circumstances.

He seemed very polite and courteous. He first

asked her if she could speak German. She shook her head. English, French, and Spanish she could speak like a native, but she had never had the opportunity of picking up the language of *Kultur*. She expressed ignorance in French and English alternately, in order to give him the choice of the two languages.

He chose English, explaining that he was far from proficient in either tongue. He spoke very slowly and haltingly; she could hardly understand him. The man in oilskins had expressed himself without any difficulty. Probably at some period of his career he had been a spy in London.

"It is rather a stormy night, but I shall make you as comfortable as I can. We have not the resources of a Hamburg-American liner."

He showed his white, even teeth in a smile. Under normal circumstances, she would have liked him for his genial bearing, his good looks. But she hated all Germans now, because of Salmon.

"One does not expect to be very comfortable under such unfavourable conditions," she said coldly

She spoke too rapidly for him to understand her. He bowed, and was about to withdraw, when some idea seemed to strike him.

"The gracious young lady will pardon me, but is she English?"

Claudia explained very briefly that she was Italian by birth and parentage, but she had lived many years in England, and regarded it as the country of her adoption.

The commander looked a little puzzled. "But you love the Fatherland, otherwise you would not serve it?" he inquired, lifting his eyebrows.

Claudia temporised; she put on her sweetest smile and her most ingenuous expression.

"The Fatherland is a great country; who would not serve it?" she said mendaciously.

The commander seemed satisfied. He expressed a hope that the gracious young lady would soon obtain repose. He feared that the journey from London, and her vigil on the beach, had wearied her. After giving utterance to these polite sentiments, he withdrew, with the same air of heavy courtesy.

And presently Claudia, overcome with fatigue and her terror of the novel situation in which she found herself, fell asleep upon a couch in the commander's own narrow little cabin.

She was aroused from a slumber that was rather fitful than deep by a noise that seemed as if Pandemonium itself was let loose. She sat up, and shrieked with terror, but many moments passed and nobody came. She herself was too paralysed to stir or move. She could distinguish the terrific noise of gunfire, and it seemed to split her ears. She thought her last hour was come.

In that awful moment, all the events in her brief life crowded before her—the hard days of childhood, her early struggles in her own country, the comparative prosperity in England, the awakening of love with the advent of Charles Laidlaw, the ill-omened introduction of Levi and Salmon into her career.

And this was to be the end of it. She had been sent to her death, and a death of the most horrible kind, to drown like a rat.

What had happened was this. The commander

had no doubt been instructed to convey his passenger to her destination with all speed, but his practical instincts had been too strong for him.

Hugging the coast of Ireland, making for the North of Scotland and over to Sweden, he had spotted a British liner entering the Clyde, off the Island of Ailsa Craig. Having taken his bearings, he had launched his torpedoes, and missed. The liner had shown fight, returned the fire, and seriously damaged the submarine. It was this intense noise of battle that had roused the unhappy Claudia from her fitful slumber.

The defeated young commander explained all this to his trembling guest, who had been fully convinced that every moment was to be her last.

"I could not resist the opportunity, although perhaps, under the circumstances, discretion might have been the better part of valour," he explained.

He tried to carry the matter off with a jaunty air, but she could see he was deeply chagrined at his failure to add another victim to his list.

"I fear our journey may be somewhat delayed in consequence," he went on. "We are crippled. In a few minutes I shall go up to the surface, put up the wireless aerial, and send a message for help."

This he did, but the help was a long time coming. For eight hours they lay submerged in this floating prison, Claudia a prey to the keenest apprehension. At times she thought she would go mad.

And then, at last, the long strain was over. A second submarine appeared, took them on board, and sank the crippled one.

Later, Claudia was landed close to the wood-built fishing village of Elfsberg. From there she had to tramp five miles into Gottenborg, where she took train to Stockholm. From Stockholm she travelled by steamer to Danzig, a distance of three hundred and fifty miles.

She found Colonel-Lieutenant von Könneritz of the German Intelligence Department awaiting her at the Danziger Hof Hotel in the Dominiks-Wall.

Von Könneritz was a trusted officer of that great Secret Service which has its headquarters in the Prussian capital, in the Königgrätzerstrasse, known to all spies as "No. 70, Berlin."

He was a big, soldierly-looking man, and received her with great politeness. He spoke English slowly and hesitatingly, but she could understand him perfectly. He expressed his regrets that she must have had a very fatiguing journey.

She explained that fatigue was not the worst part of it, and narrated to him the fight between the liner and the submarine.

Von Könneritz yawned "It was foolhardy of Oberfeld to run such risks He might have known the safe arrival of yourself with your despatches was the first consideration. But these brave young men are often lacking in discretion."

She handed to him the packet that had been entrusted to her by Salmon. He opened it, and pulled out a letter which he perused with every appearance of satisfaction.

"This is excellent! And my thanks, and the thanks of the Fatherland, are due to you, my dear

young lady, for your courage in taking this arduous voyage. To-morrow, I will give you a letter to take back to the excellent Salmon. Now, for yourself, there are two very imperative things, refreshment and rest. Follow me, and I will see that you are supplied with both."

She was young and vigorous, and a long night's sleep restored her to her full bodily and mental powers. She almost forgot those tragic eight hours in the submerged submarine, when she had given up all hope. Von Könneritz gave her his letter for Salmon, and she was ready to set out on her return journey.

"It will be tedious and fatiguing, but there will be no repetition of the previous perils," he explained to her. "Strict instructions will be given to avoid any hazardous enterprise while you are on board," he added with a courtly bow. "The lives of such brave agents as yourself must be safeguarded. Again many thanks for your service and devotion."

Claudia thought he seemed a very good specimen of a Teuton, but no doubt, like Salmon, there was a latent brute lurking somewhere in him.

It was with feelings of the most intense relief that she set her foot again on English soil. She spent the night at Llandudno at a house recommended to her by Salmon, and went up to London the following day by an early train.

She had been puzzling her brains all the way back as to the possibility of hoodwinking her taskmaster, of preventing him getting the packet which had been handed to her by Von Könneritz. She hated him so, for the danger to which he had exposed her, that she longed to be even with him.

Chance gave her an opportunity, which she was not imaginative enough to invent. She had, rather carelessly, put her bag in a corner of the corridor amongst a lot of other luggage. There were half a dozen other bags similar in size and appearance. In getting out of the train, she hastily picked up her own, as she thought. It was not till she reached home that she found her mistake. Her own bag, with the precious packet in it, had been taken by somebody else, or deposited at the lost luggage office.

She was half-glad, and yet half-afraid. She knew she was innocent, but Salmon was very suspicious of her, and might think it was one of her little tricks to outwit him.

She took her courage in both hands, and drove round to his private house. He swore terribly, and raved like a madman ; it was easy to see that he more than half disbelieved her story.

She made the best excuses she could, told him that her terrible adventures in the submarine had unhinged and unnerved her, and that she was hardly mistress of her own actions.

When he had calmed down a little, she asked what course he wished her to pursue. Should she take back the bag she had brought away in mistake, and institute inquiries after her own ?

After some hesitation, he agreed. There were certain risks attendant upon such a proceeding, but he decided to run them. The envelope was addressed to Mr. Salmon, Variety Agent, Green Street, Leicester Square. It was very unlikely that anybody would open it.

Three days later, the envelope, unbroken, was sent

to him under a covering letter, written by a woman hailing from an address in the West of England. She explained that she had taken the wrong bag, but she had been travelling about, and had not had time to write before. Finding the letter inside, she had forwarded it to him, as he would know the owner, and could effect an exchange.

Salmon's delight at receiving Von Könneritz's message was turned into the deepest chagrin when he read it. The information it contained would have been of the most vital importance, had he received it in time. It had reached him just twenty-four hours too late !

His bitterness against Claudia was extreme. His doubts of her bona fides revived in greater strength. His disappointment merged into an almost savage hatred, which reached its culminating stage a little later.

CHAPTER XIX

PUT TO THE TEST

TWO men were seated in the private room of the offices in Green Street—Salmon and his old friend, Lewis Levi. The dapper young attendant had been told to say that his chief had gone out, and would not be back till the afternoon.

The variety agent looked a different person; the majority of his clients would not have recognised him. The bluff, genial personality which had made him so popular had vanished.

He was frowning heavily. There was a hard, relentless look in his bold eyes; his jaw was firm and set. The latent brute and bully in the man had come to the surface.

He banged his heavy hand down on the table "I tell you that this 'Golden Catspaw,' this chit I picked out of the gutter——"

"Softly, my friend; your anger runs away with you a little, does it not?" interrupted Levi softly. He took rather a pleasure in baiting Salmon when his friend gave way to those passionate outbursts. "Not quite in the gutter. Let us say, a minor artist."

"You were always fond of hair-splitting. Say a

minor artist—what is that but being in the gutter, when you think of what I have made her? "

"For your own purposes," suggested Levi smoothly. "Do you expect gratitude from a woman, my excellent comrade? If so, you will be terribly disappointed."

"Gratitude, no," thundered the other man. "Fair dealing, yes. I repeat, I picked her out of the gutter. I knew of that compromising letter. I made a clean bargain with her. I told her that in twenty-four hours I could use my knowledge to blast her career and turn her lover against her. I named the terms on which she could purchase my forbearance. She accepted those terms. Have I not a right to complain if she accepts them in the letter and breaks them in the spirit? "

"Are you sure that she has broken them in the spirit? " suggested the imperturbable Levi.

"Do you think I am an absolute fool, then? "

"Far from it, my dear Salmon. But at the present moment you are very angry, and pardon me for reminding you that an angry man is never in full possession of his faculties."

"Levi! " retorted the other, in a venomous tone. "If I had not been assured of your patriotism a hundred times, I might entertain doubts of your fidelity. I wonder," he added, with a coarse laugh, "if she has twisted you round her little finger, as I am pretty sure she did that fool Mattelli? "

Lewis Levi bent his searching gaze upon his confederate. "You know well enough that I am too good a German to let a woman influence me overmuch. I

might make the suggestion more appropriately to yourself ; of course, not in this particular instance, for you seem to have got your knife into the poor little ' Golden Catspaw.' "

" Poor little ' Golden Catspaw,' indeed ! " snorted Salmon, in his loud, bullying tones. " She is clever as the devil, in her own way, not mine, mark you."

" What would you expect ? " asked Levi, in his cool, detached tones. " It was always a weakness of yours, Salmon, that you would impress everybody into your service, willing or unwilling. My dear friend, if you pursue that process, you must be prepared for occasional failures."

He added, after a pause : " I am as good a German as you are, but I always thought ensnaring little Claudia was rather a low-down trick."

" You did, did you ? " snarled Salmon, getting more infuriated under the calmness of the other. " Well, if you are a good German, you will know that the end justifies the means."

" In this case, the end doesn't seem to be in sight." Levi uttered the words so softly that they did not reach his friend's ears.

' Use the word ' ensnare ' if you like ; it doesn't offend me," said Salmon, after a moment's pause. " I ensnared Clémentine Lafelle from a sense of gratitude. Her father was an Austrian, a blackguard to boot, but in her heart she cared no more for Germans than Frenchmen. Yet she kept to her bargain. And she died game. I have no doubt she could have bought her life, as many of them do, if she had betrayed us. But she never uttered a word ; she died game."

" Clémentine Lafelle was an adventuress, pure and simple, and there was a criminal taint in her blood, derived, probably, from her Austrian father ; possibly she had an unconscious sympathy with her compatriots," observed Levi, in his calm, emotionless tone. " The little Catspaw is not an adventuress. And, if she does not hate the Germans, she must loathe the ' Tedeschi.' "

If Levi was trying to make the path easier for poor Claudia, he was surely going the wrong way. Perhaps he was only trying to annoy Salmon and convince him that his judgment was not always infallible.

Anyway, opposition to the truculent variety agent was like waving a red flag in the face of an angry bull. Salmon only grew more obstinate, more menacing.

" I tell you," he thundered, " I have bought this mealy-mouthed girl whom, I repeat, I picked out of the gutter, for twelve months. Old Mattelli bungled that ; I ought to have bought her for life. I will bring it to an issue within the next twenty-four hours. If she does not give me some proof of her fidelity it will go hard with her."

Levi rose, and placed his hand upon the shoulder of the excited man.

" Calm yourself, my old friend. We are both good Germans ; we love the Fatherland well. But we have made something out of these pig-headed Islanders, eh ? And, remember, we must always take care of our own skins."

" Take care of our own skins. What do you mean ? "

demanded Salmon, his blustering manner softening for a moment before the deadly calm of his old associate.

"There are times when I fear for your zeal, your excitability. You are quieter now, but a moment ago you had murder in your eye. Check those impulses, old friend. Always remember, your own skin is the first consideration with a man who has a headpiece. I shall say *au revoir*. The atmosphere is a little too sultry."

He went out by the side door, and Salmon shook his fist angrily at the retreating form.

"I doubt if your patriotism is very deep, my excellent comrade," he growled. "I will wager you would not face the bullets like Clémentine Lafelle. *Ach*, she was a woman."

By the afternoon he was more composed. When Claudia appeared in answer to an urgent telephonic summons, he had recovered something of his ordinary demeanour. He greeted her politely, almost deferentially, but she could see he was in a dangerous mood. How different from the day when he had smilingly pressed upon her an engagement at the Salone Margherita!

"Be seated, signorina. I want a little serious conversation with you. It is time that our obligations towards each other were more clearly defined."

Claudia bowed her beautiful head. Stray sunbeams wandering through the badly-lighted room touched her glorious Titian hair to a brighter hue.

"I helped you. I got you out of a tight corner, did I not?" he asked, bending on her his hard, penetrating gaze.

Her pulses beat fast. He had the assurance of his position, the knowledge that he held her in an iron grasp. But she had something almost as strong—the courage of despair.

"We will put it a little more truthfully, if you don't mind. You got me out of one tight corner to put me in another one for your own ends."

His face hardened. A heavy frown settled over the handsome features.

"You have no interest in this work, then? Your answer implies as much," he said in a harsh voice.

"Frankly, no," she answered boldly. "What could you expect of an Italian, a girl unused to intrigue? I agreed to pay a certain debt, I undertook to do that with my eyes open. I have tried to pay it to the best of my ability."

"Your eyes were open, you had your choice," he said in a sombre voice. "You chose my terms, or, rather, the easy terms that the visionary Mattelli agreed to on my behalf. And you have not paid the debt. Claudia Erba, you know that as well as I do. I doubt if you have ever intended to pay it."

She dissembled as well as she could, but she felt those piercing eyes were reading her like an open book.

"You wrong me, Mr. Salmon. I admit I have not paid off much of the debt. But I am still a novice. I have done my best, but circumstances have been against me. I cannot perform the impossible."

Salmon hesitated for a moment before he spoke again. "If you were a fool, I might accept your explanation. But I don't think that. I believe you are clever, cleverer than you lead me to suppose.

But "—his voice rose loud and menacing—" if it is in your mind to play a waiting game, don't play it with me. I have had my doubts of you for a long time. I have them still. Of one thing I am certain—you have played me false with Charles Laidlaw."

She shrugged her shoulders with an air of protestation. " Is it my fault? I sent you word long ago through Signor Mattelli that he was a keen diplomatist, and much too clever for me. No woman could hoodwink him."

" Bosh, utter bosh ! " cried Salmon furiously. " He is not clever, and he is hopelessly in love with you. If you had exercised an ounce of the brains that I am convinced you possess, you could have twisted him round your little finger. You failed because you lacked the will, not the means."

He rose to his great height and thundered forth the words : " Claudia Erba, I picked you from the gutter, I have made you rich and famous, I have saved you from ruin. And you have played me false."

The man's overwhelming personality crushed her powers of resistance. She bent her head upon her hands, and sobbed bitterly. If he had a heart at all, he would not persist in his inflexible purpose.

" Let me go, I beg you. Poor Clémentine told me once that she was sure you had made a bad bargain. I cannot learn your wiles, your subtlety. In the name of heaven, let me go. She was sacrificed to your ruthless designs. Do you want yet another victim? "

If he had a heart, it must have resembled that of a tiger. She looked beautiful, even in her abandonment, in her tearful appeal to his compassion. But

nothing appealed to this fanatical Teuton, warped out of all semblance to humanity by his devotion to his country. The charm of her sex, her beauty, were powerless to move him.

"You have played me false all through, and that dreamy visionary, Mattelli, who cares not whose gold he takes, so long as it is enough, has shielded you as far as he could. It is not mere coincidence that you have failed so often. You have set your woman's wit against mine, but you will not win by that. To-night I am going to put you to a test. By that I will judge you."

She lifted her tear-stained face to his.

"And what is the test? It may be one beyond my powers," she said in a faltering voice.

There was no pity in the hard, inflexible voice.

"By that I will judge you. Get from Charles Laidlaw something that is really useful; no information deftly turned or made to bear a false construction—you understand what I mean. No little lapses of memory, no paltry feminine tricks. Something useful. Bring me that, and I shall believe you are paying your debt."

"And if I fail?" she breathed in a low voice.

"We will not speak of failure." A sinister look crept over his face. "But remember, this is my last word. I have a short way with traitors."

"You would reveal the contents of that letter," she gasped.

A grim smile crossed his massive face. "Why not? It is still in my possession. If you break your bargain with me, I do not keep mine. Once I told you I could

make or break you. I have made you. Take care I do not break you."

"In that case, I could denounce you," she said, with a boldness she was far from feeling.

"Do so, if you choose," he answered, with a contemptuous gesture. "Do so, and involve us both in a common ruin. I have served my country well; in her service I am contented to die—I fear not death in such a cause. But you are young, you have a lover. Life has still some savour for a woman who has a career and a man she loves."

For a moment his mood changed. The old geniality seemed to come back. He laid his hand on her shoulder, and his voice was almost caressing.

"Be a good little girl, now. Pay your debt and justify my faith in you. Bring me some really useful information from Laidlaw. He has an important post at the Foreign Office; he must know much. What does it matter to you which side wins? A few more months and you are free, free to marry the man you love, free to improve the position I have secured for you."

He was adopting the cajoling tone now. But she hated and feared him just as much when he cajoled as when he threatened and bullied.

"I did make you, did I not?" he went on in his smooth, wheedling tones. "If I had not taken you up, where would you be now? Earning your paltry few pounds a week at obscure music-halls."

"Do not remind me of it," she cried in a choking voice. "I was happier then in my poverty and obscurity. Would to heaven you had never crossed

my path. What is my success, the money that it brings, compared to the horrible nightmare that is weighing upon me?"

His face took on its former grim expression. "It is too late for repining, Claudia. I crossed your path, and our paths run side by side till the allotted time. You know what I expect of you, what I will have from you, if you do not want to make me your enemy. There is no need to talk further. I have set you your task; take care that you accomplish it."

She left the room, those sinister words ringing in her ears, her brain confused with her torturing thoughts. She had set her small wits to work against those of this cunning fiend, and he was still her master. She was his bondslave, and he would force her to obey him unless——

Terrible ideas came into her mind as she walked the street, hardly knowing whither she was going. There was a swift way out of it all. Dared she take it? And every impulse of her warm, vigorous womanhood cried out against that cowardly solution. He should not drive her to a self-inflicted death.

But her reserve, her powers of resistance, had been broken down in that brief interview that had unfolded such menacing issues. She had kept this secret to herself up to the present; the moment had come when she must reveal it to somebody.

There were but two persons in the world in whom she could confide: her father and Maudie Farrell. Poor old Beppo was a paralytic, his brain softened; no use appealing to him.

It was some hours before she could screw up her

courage to make her confession to her girl friend. She feared the judgment of this honest, upright English-woman, who would never juggle with her conscience.

In the deepening twilight—she chose that time, because the merciful shadows hid her face—she told the terrible story of how she had succumbed to the tempter, how she had sold herself to a shameful slavery.

Whatever Miss Farrell thought as she listened to the stumbling recital, choked with sobs, she made no comment. When it was finished, she understood, and she pitied.

"If I had been with you then, you would never have done this," she said in her slow, grave way. "Do you remember the telegram I sent you, on receipt of your first letter?"

Yes, Claudia remembered every word of it.

"I told you then, as I tell you to-night, to make a clean breast of it to Charles Laidlaw. If I thought it imperative then, I think it more imperative now. I am only a woman, perhaps a little more sensible than some, but this is a man's work, and it wants a man's firm grasp. Go to your lover to-night; repeat to him every word you have said to me."

"And, if he spurns me, if he looks upon me as something too vile?" cried Claudia tremulously.

Miss Farrell paced the room in her agitation. "Even if that happens—the worst that can happen—he will advise you how to get out of their clutches. He will devise ways and means to extricate you, and perhaps turn the tables upon them."

Claudia rose, her attitude of dejection for the moment abandoned. A light of courage flashed into her tear-dimmed eyes.

"You are right, dear friend. You have made me brave. I will go to him at once. If he is not there, I will wait till I see him."

Miss Farrell fetched her hat and cloak, and put them on her. And then the old fear came back and drove out the new-born courage

The poor tortured girl sank back into a chair, trembling and dismayed at the enterprise to which she had committed herself.

"I cannot, I cannot," she wailed, in despairing tones. "It is not obstinacy; it is simply fear. It is not that I will not. I cannot, I cannot confront him and tell him what I have told you. I could not bear to see the love die out of his eyes when he found me unworthy. I would rather face death itself."

Miss Farrell was silent for a long time. If she felt a little angry for such weakness, she was too kind to show it. Then she laid her hand gently on her friend's shoulder.

"Claudia, I will not say I understand all that you are feeling, but I understand something, perhaps enough. If your courage fails you, will you let me go to him and tell him what he has a right to know?"

Claudia sprang up, her eyes aglow.

"Maudie, you will do this for me? You will plead for me, will you not? You will tell him that I consented for fear of losing him?"

A few moments later Miss Farrell was ready. She bestowed a warm kiss on Claudia's feverish cheek.

"I think I shall prove a skilful advocate," she said. And then, as an afterthought struck her, she added: "Come with me and wait in the taxi outside. I shall bring you a message, one way or the other, from your beloved Carlo."

CHAPTER XX

LOVE THAT UNDERSTANDS

CHARLES LAIDLAW had just finished some overdue letters. He laid down his pen with a sigh of relief. His man had turned on the electric light half an hour ago. He looked at his watch.

"By Jove, it is late; no wonder I was beginning to feel hungry," he muttered to himself. "I'll get a bit of dinner at the club, and afterwards run in to see Claudia for a few minutes."

But he was fated to be delayed. The door of the sitting-room opened, and Simmons announced a visitor. It was Miss Farrell.

He was surprised to observe that her manner was hesitating and embarrassed. He had not seen very much of her, except on the few occasions when she had accompanied Claudia to lunch and dinner, and as a matter of course, at such times she had rather effaced herself.

What he had seen had prepossessed him in her favour. She was not brilliant; she lacked his sweetheart's compelling charm. But he was sure that behind that somewhat emotionless exterior there lay many sterling qualities—strength of character, warmth of heart, honesty of purpose.

She had never been in his rooms before, although

once or twice he had sent her an invitation through Claudia to pay him a visit. What did this unlooked-for appearance portend? Was she the bearer of bad news? Was Claudia ill, had she met with an accident?

His face turned pale at the thought. His voice trembled as he addressed the hesitating girl.

"Miss Farrell! I am pleased to see you. But I am a little alarmed. The hour is so late for an ordinary visit. You do not bring me bad news?"

Of course, she saw at once this was the first impression her unexpected appearance would create. She hastened to reassure him.

"It was foolish of me to burst in upon you so suddenly, but I could not wait. Nothing of the kind you imagine has happened. Claudia is safe and well."

The tension of the scene between the two women, her realisation of the delicacy, perhaps the difficulty of the task she had undertaken—it seemed very formidable now she found herself face to face with the high-bred, honourable young Englishman—made her very shamefaced and awkward.

Laidlaw breathed a deep sigh of relief. The colour stole back to his face. His easy manner returned.

He wheeled up an easy-chair in front of her. "Please be seated, Miss Farrell. I had all sorts of foolish fears when I saw you standing in the doorway. But you say Claudia is safe and well. Then nothing much can be wrong. You have come with some message from her, I presume?"

His visitor spoke with difficulty; her brain was in a whirl; she could not clearly order her ideas or her words.

He

"In a way, yes, I have a message from her. I have come to tell you something that I urged her to tell you herself, something that I urged her to tell you long ago. She lacked the courage then—she lacks it now."

Laidlaw's happiness had been short-lived. There was no mistaking the tragic import of those words.

"Why does she lack the courage?" he asked, in a voice that was hardly more steady than that of the woman who was speaking to him.

Maudie Farrell's answer came back, in tones low and tremulous.

"She fears that her life's happiness may be snatched from her, that your love will not bear the strain of what I have to tell you."

"My love can bear much. It must be something very serious, something that I cannot even conjecture, that would separate myself and Claudia."

For a moment Miss Farrell paused. When she had urged Claudia to make her own confession to her lover, with the irresistible appeal of a woman who knows she is loved, she had not fully realised the difficulty of the task. Now, in the comparatively detached position of the ambassador, the advocate, it confronted her grimly.

But the spectacle of Laidlaw's dejection stimulated her to exertion. Claudia's destiny was in her hands. She thought of the patient, trembling figure waiting outside to know the result of her mission. That remembrance braced her. Her nervousness, her hesitation, vanished. True to her role of advocate, she must secure a verdict that meant life, not death.

She had a deep, rather thrilling voice, and it was charged with pathos as she addressed the man who was both lover and judge.

"Mr. Laidlaw, you belong to a different world from that of Claudia Erba and myself. We, perhaps, can understand a little of yours; you can know nothing of ours, of our struggles, our poverty, our hard shifts"; she paused purposely, and added, in significant tones, "our temptations."

"Our temptations," he repeated blankly. Then he took in the full significance of the phrase. He spoke, and the words fell slowly, one by one, as if wrung from him.

"You mean that she has some secret in her past life, before she met me? And, heaven, she is so young! It cannot be a shameful one, such as shuts her out from all forgiveness. You, her friend, know it, and are still her friend. There must be some excuse, some explanation. I implore you to assure me of this. I am convinced that you are an honourable Englishwoman, as I pride myself on being an honourable Englishman. If you can still be her friend, I know that I can still be her lover—in time her husband."

His voice ended in a shrill note of supplication, almost of despair. At this supreme moment the girl prayed that her woman's wits would not desert her now.

"You love her?" she asked steadfastly. "Not with a passing fancy, the mere caprice of a man of the world attracted by a charming girl? You love her in the holiest sense of the word?"

"As heaven is my judge, I do," he answered fervently. "She is the one woman in the world for me. I care nothing for the difference between our two worlds, to which you have alluded. Claudia Erba is soul of my soul, life of my life. Will that content you?"

"I think so. Well, I have remained her friend, and I think I may say I am an honourable Englishwoman. If I have done that, there is no reason why you should not remain her lover."

"Thank you for those words, Miss Farrell."

"I have weighed and judged and acquitted, knowing all the circumstances, and, taking into account her Southern nature, I ask you to do the same, and I will tell you the first chapter of the miserable story."

She told him briefly of Claudia's desperate straits when she went to the office of Langston & Co.; of the way in which the wily Langston had overcome her scruples; the writing of that false testimonial.

She could see that he winced terribly under the recital. It was agony to his proud and honourable spirit to know that his beautiful sweetheart had stooped to such deception. But he came through the ordeal bravely.

"My love can make excuses, Miss Farrell. She was young; she did not think deeply, as you or I should; and her poverty made her less critical than she would have been under happier circumstances."

Miss Farrell's spirits rose. Half of her task was accomplished, but the harder part remained.

"Unfortunately, Mr. Laidlaw, that first false step led to others of an even more serious nature. That

one act, for which you and I can find excuses, involved her in consequences far-reaching and disastrous. It was when the net was closing round her that she sought my advice. I gave it her—to confess all to you. Alas, she disregarded it."

"Why did she disregard it?" asked Laidlaw.

"From the same feminine fear that you would refuse to forgive, that she would lose your love, and, in losing that, lose all that made life sweet to her."

"She loves me, then, as I love her?" he asked, in a broken voice.

"If possible, more. She loves like a woman, and a Southern woman to boot."

"Please go on, Miss Farrell. There is more to come, and I can brace myself to bear it. Oh, why did she not tell me this long ago?"

He listened in silence to the long narrative that followed, his head bowed in his hands. He heard of the intrusion of Salmon, the German masquerading as an Englishman; his sudden adoption of her, an obscure artist; the visit of Blunden the blackmailer. Her doubts, her fears, her despair, her terror of confessing the truth, and, finally her compact with the hunchback to serve the cause of Germany for twelve months, her share of the bargain being that she should pursue her career and retain her lover.

And he learned, further, that she had done her best to foil her taskmasters, that she had set her woman's wits against theirs to some purpose till now Salmon had suspected her all along. To-day he had put to her a final test.

"I have compelled her to do at the eleventh hour

what she ought to have done when this blackmailing scoundrel first came upon the scene," concluded Miss Farrell—" to put herself in your hands. In your hands I must leave her, only hoping and praying that you will be a merciful judge."

For a long time he sat there, in that terrible attitude of dejection. Impossible to conjecture what thoughts were passing in his mind. She herself could not say honestly what judgment she would form if she were in his position.

And then, suddenly, he raised his head and looked at her. There was a soft and tender light in his eyes. The battle might have been hard, but he had fought it out.

" She has erred and suffered for love of me," he murmured in low tones. " She was weak and foolish ; she was afraid, in the first instance, that my love would not stand the test."

" That was the sole consideration all through," said Miss Farrell steadfastly. " Claudia is not like ordinary women. Love with her is a religion. To lose you would have been worse than death itself. I, her friend, have understood and forgiven. You, her lover, will understand and forgive too."

Laidlaw reached out his hand, and the true-hearted woman grasped it warmly.

" Claudia is fortunate in having such a friend. But for you, who can foretell what the end might have been."

Maudie Farrell shuddered. Who could tell what desperate step this tortured girl, driven to bay, might have taken but for her intervention.

A tender light broke over Laidlaw's face as the winsome image of his sweetheart rose before him.

"I must go to her at once," he cried. "Shall I find her at her own home?"

The young woman smiled happily. "No need for you to stir from where you are; she is waiting for you. In a moment I will send her to you."

She ran swiftly down the stairs and opened the door of the taxi. Claudia was sitting huddled in a corner, her face white, every nerve on the rack. She looked at her friend and saw that she was smiling. A great cry escaped her.

"Maudie, it is not true. Has, has he——?" She could not finish the broken sentence; her voice died away in a great sob.

Maudie Farrell led her gently to the door. "He understands; he is waiting for you to go to him."

She watched the dazed girl ascend the staircase, then got into the taxi herself and drove away. Tears of happiness were running down her face. Love, so far, had never brightened her life, but she could understand the feelings of these two young lovers, who, but for her timely aid, might have drifted far apart.

Claudia stood timidly in the doorway, her eyes cast down, her bosom heaving.

He made a step forward, and opened his arms. "My darling, my sweetheart, come to me."

The next second she was gathered to his heart.

CHAPTER XXI

"THE GOBBO" REVEALS SOMETHING

AN hour later the lovers were seated in a small, unfashionable restaurant. Not Luigi's; that had become hateful to her; it was too full of memories of that warm summer night when Lewis Levi had spun the first threads of the web which had ensnared her to her undoing.

Claudia's cheek had a roseate flush, her eyes were sparkling. So swiftly do women of the Latin temperament pass from one extreme to the other. An hour ago a pale and drooping lily; now, the full-bloodedness of the rose.

Was the reason far to seek? In that swift hour her sweetheart's faith had been proved. She was secure in his affection, in the knowledge that he would stand by her against the world, if need be; against those who pressed her sorely now.

They had been late for dinner, and had lingered long over their meal. The place was almost empty. They could talk without fear of being overheard.

Laidlaw spoke, his sweetheart fixing upon him trustful and adoring eyes. Salmon had said that her Carlo was not clever. That was because he was quiet and self-contained. Salmon could not believe

in cleverness that was not associated with truculence.

" Listen, dearest. We are up against a great organisation which does not lack for brains. We have got to show that we can match them."

Claudia nodded happily. She felt so safe in the hands of her dear Carlo. But, of course, she could not follow his subtler intelligence. She was content to believe in him. If he said he would outwit them, she was sure he would do it. Such is the blind faith of woman.

" Salmon wants from you some information that shall really be useful to him. Well, he shall have it, the information ; I will give you copious notes, that you will be supposed to have wheedled out of me when I was in a lover-like and confidential mood."

As he spoke these words, she noticed a firm set about the youthful jaw, and a steely look in the blue eyes that usually were kind and soft. She was surprised at a certain change in her beloved Carlo, who, she had herself believed, was not very clever in the sense in which Salmon and his colleagues interpreted cleverness.

" To save me you would give them some information that would really be useful to the enemy ? "

She was puzzled as she put the question. Would her beloved Carlo, the honourable English gentleman, betray his country for his love of her ? She knew that she had made a similar sacrifice. But she was a woman, he was a man. She recognised in a dim way the difference of ethics between the sexes.

He looked at her steadfastly ; there was just the suspicion of a smile round the curves of his pleasant mouth.

"Yes, little Claudia—I don't know quite why I call you little; you are of quite average height; I suppose it is a term of endearment—for love of you. I have read your thoughts, you see. I shall give you that information."

He paused to note the effect of his words upon her. He was a diplomatist to the very marrow, although he had no very keen love for his profession. He had not been promoted from one post to another, ending in an important position in the Foreign Office, for nothing. His father, the self-sufficient Sir Francis, was never quite certain whether or not his son had brains. The chiefs of the Foreign Office were quite sure. Hence his rapid promotion.

"But, Carlo mio, you are running great risks. If this does good to the enemy, what becomes of you?"

Laidlaw smiled his charming, enigmatic smile. "Leave it to me, little doubter. To use a stock phrase, 'Wait and see.' The Germans think they have a monopoly of brains. Well, in this island of something over forty millions of slow-witted inhabitants, there are still left a few who can out-manœuvre them."

Claudia still looked puzzled. He laughed in his quiet, humorous way. He had got over the horror of it all. The moving impulse in him was to outwit the other side. A swift flash of intuition had come to him, and he was going to keep this to himself.

"The lights are low, *cara mia*." He addressed her in the soft, caressing Italian words. "It is time you were home. I will deliver you to the care of dear Beppo."

But her fears were not allayed. As they drove home in the taxi, she pressed his arm and laid her soft cheek against his.

" Carlo," she said softly, " you will run no risk, you promise me that. If anyone has to pay the penalty, let it be myself, I who was so foolish as not to trust in your love."

He silenced her with a kiss. " Little coward, what did I tell you just now? Wait and see. Neither of us will pay the penalty. That will be paid by the other side."

Her heart beat at these confident and comforting words. How right Maudie Farrell had been! One always needed a man's strong brain, a man's strong arm.

Miss Farrell and Beppo were in the sitting-room. The poor old wood-carver was incapable, a victim of premature senility. The only vital thing about him was the restless eyes that roved to and fro. Another noticeable action was the rubbing together of the thin, emaciated hands.

Laidlaw, always considerate, leant over Beppo's chair, and murmured a few words in Italian. The poor paralytic tried to wag his palsied head to and fro.

Claudia rushed over to her friend, knelt before her, and clasped her in her arms.

" How can I thank you for what you have done, you more than angel? We should so have loved to have you stay with us. And you ran away."

" I knew that if I had stayed I should have been *de trop*," said Miss Farrell quietly.

She knew that she would always be *de trop*, this quiet, self-contained woman. It was her rôle in life to assist, and look on at the happiness of others.

Claudia's eyes grew misty. She guessed something of her friend's thoughts.

"We lovers are terribly selfish. But I did miss you, Maudie; believe me, I did miss you."

Miss Farrell bent and kissed the glowing cheek, a few hours ago so pale. "I am sure you missed me, dear, when you had time to think of me. It is the way of youth and love. But you have been very kind to me, Claudia, and I have done a little to repay my debt."

Laidlaw crossed over to his sweetheart.

"Darling, leave this all to me. When I am ready, I will let you know. In the meantime, propitiate Salmon. Use all your pretty, coaxing ways; I shall not be jealous. Lead him to think you are working hard for him."

He held out his hand to Miss Farrell.

"A thousand thanks for the part you have played; Claudia, I am sure, recognises you for a true friend. Well, we shall outwit them. In a few days the tables will be turned. I can say no more at present."

Miss Farrell turned to Claudia when he had left. Her voice was a little stern.

"When I first met him, I thought he was of the ordinary type of debonair young Englishman, not, perhaps, over-gifted with brains. Take it from me, Claudia, I was mistaken. Charles Laidlaw is a strong man. He will prove himself shortly."

Claudia, truth to tell, had formed the same opinion.

She had loved her Carlo to distraction, but she had never thought him clever. He was too placid, too easy-going. And, as Maudie Farrell spoke, she remembered how the wise men at the Foreign Office had picked him out for promotion. They had more prescience than she.

When she awoke the next morning she felt a different being. The events of the wonderful evening, the calm assurance of her lover, had lifted the heavy load from her. She remembered an old saying of her father's that a joy shared is doubled, a sorrow shared is halved. For the first time for weeks, her step was buoyant; she could not think of trivial things; she hummed joyously to herself as she busied herself in her light domestic duties.

Two days later she met Salmon in Oxford Street. She would have passed on, after a slight salutation, but he detained her with an imperative gesture.

" You have not forgotten our conversation, I hope," he said. There was menace in his glance and voice.

She smiled sweetly. " Oh, no, Mr. Salmon. I have been thinking of nothing else since. I have been setting my wits to work. I hope to justify myself shortly."

She lied to him with easy grace. Had not Carlo told her to keep him in a good humour, the wonderful Carlo who had turned out to be as clever as he was charming and delightful?

His truculence softened before her irresistible smile, her confident words. He had gone the right way to work, then; he had frightened her. That was the proper way, the only way to treat women. He

was too staunch a Teuton to believe in gentle methods where the weaker sex was concerned.

She was rather late in getting home for the midday meal. Miss Farrell had administered to the wants of the poor old helpless Beppo, and was just about to sit down to the table. Claudia had gone out on a shopping expedition, and very frequently on such occasions she snatched a hasty lunch at some restaurant that was handy.

"A letter came for you, dear, about an hour ago. It was brought by a boy who could only speak a few words of English. He said it came from Signor Mattelli and was urgent."

Claudia tore open the envelope, and a cry escaped her as she perused the letter. It was addressed from a small street in Soho.

"It is from poor old 'Gobbo,'" she cried excitedly. "It is written in pencil, and only just decipherable. He says he is very ill, on the point of death, and must see me at once. He has something important to communicate."

To Miss Farrell, the hunchback, so far as she knew his history, was a member of the infamous organisation, for whom death, in any form, was a fitting penalty for his crimes.

But Claudia was genuinely concerned. The melancholy anarchist, who had taken to spying for a livelihood, whose gentle, dreamy temperament was in such strong contrast to his political convictions, had interested her. He had pitied her all through, had shielded her from the wrath of her taskmaster as far as he dared.

" I must go to him at once. He was kind to me ; he made it as easy for me as he could," she cried.

" But you must have some lunch first," observed the practical Maudie. " I don't suppose he is so bad as all that. He was able to write the letter." She spoke rather brutally, from the strong conviction that the world would be no poorer, but rather the gainer, by the removal of Signor Mattelli to another sphere.

Claudia looked a little reproachfully at her friend. If it had been Salmon, she could have approved. But Maudie did not understand the complexities of a strange nature like Mattelli's, could not admit that he might have some good points.

Obediently she swallowed a little soup, and then resisting all further entreaties to delay, left the flat, and, hailing a taxi, was driven to the mean street in Soho.

The door was opened by the landlady, a buxom Italian woman, who explained volubly that the poor signor was very bad, the doctor thought he would not live through the night. A nurse was with him. His rooms were on the second floor. She would show the signorina.

It was evident that either Matelli was very poorly paid or exceedingly thrifty. Or perhaps he preferred to live like the downtrodden masses whose cause he had so deeply at heart. Claudia, accustomed to her elegant flat, shuddered at the poverty and odours of the mean house.

A thin-faced young woman, also of Italian nationality, sat in a corner of the poorly-furnished room. She rose at Claudia's entrance and put her

finger to her lips, whispering to her in their common language.

"I am afraid you are too late. He has been in a stupor for some time. The doctor says he may go off like that."

But, even as she spoke, the hunchback opened his tired eyes, and a faint gleam came into them as he recognised his visitor. He signed to the nurse to come closer.

"Leave us a little while. I have something private to say to the signorina."

The young woman withdrew. Claudia, the tears running down her face, put her slender palm on the emaciated hand that lay almost inert on the dingy, discoloured counterpane. She felt very sorry for poor "Gobbo," dying in this wretched tenement, dying, as it seemed, alone, without friend or relative to soothe his last hours. He had told her long ago that he had no kith or kin.

"I am glad you have come, dear little girl," he said in a faint, whispering voice. It was evident he was very near the end. "The nurse is a good young woman and a compatriot, but somehow I longed to see you. I loved you from the first because you reminded me so of my dear dead child. Like you, she was beautiful; like you, she was full of charm."

"But you will get better, dear signor. You are not an old man." But, as she spoke the words, she knew he would never get better. Death was already in his face.

"You say that out of your kind heart, to cheer me, dear little girl. But I am not afraid, and on the whole

I am not sorry to go. Life has not been too sweet for me. If I could live to see some of my cherished dreams and hopes come true, I would not mind dragging this poor distorted frame through a few more years of existence."

He paused a second from exhaustion, and she bent over him and gently wiped the dew from his forehead.

" But will they ever come true? " he whispered. " When this *canaille* have finished cutting each other's throats, will the world be a saner place in consequence of all this bloodshed and slaughter? I have my doubts. It *must* come some day, but not in mine nor yours."

He lay still for some little time. She thought he was sinking again into the sleep from which he might never wake. She stroked the thin hand, and he opened his eyes.

" You had something of importance to tell me," she said in a low voice.

Her tones, hushed as they were, raised in him a momentary vitality. His voice was firmer than it had been since she entered the room.

" Yes, I have wasted too much time already in talking of myself. Let me now speak of you. You came to us unwillingly, ensnared by Salmon. Would you be glad to get out of the bondage? "

She clasped her hands together; her eloquent eyes gave the answer.

" Feel under the pillow to the right; you will find two packets."

She did as he bade her, and drew forth two envelopes —one large, the other small.

" Keep those; they are for you," said the dying

man, in that firm voice of momentary energy. "The big one contains my will. I have put by a little money. I could have lived differently had I chosen, but I wished to live no better than the poor, downtrodden slaves whose cause I have espoused. I have left it to you."

"But I do not need money," she protested.

"I know that, little girl. If you pursue your career you will have plenty of money of your own. And, if you give it up, you will marry your fiancé, the Englishman whom you love. You are to hold what I have left you in trust for those less fortunate than yourself."

She would have wished it otherwise. It was tainted money, even if it were applied to a good object. But she could not say that to a man with the shadows of death on his face.

"Even if you confine yourself to your own profession, there will be many poor creatures to whom a few pounds now and again will mean salvation, the renewal of hope. You have told me you have known poverty yourself. You will do this for me, will you not?"

"Yes, dear Signor Mattelli, I will hold this money in trust for the object you wish."

She wondered if he would have strength to talk any more or refer to the contents of that other packet. He had asked her if she would like to be delivered from her bondage.

His will conquered his weakness. The voice was a little fainter, but every word was clear and distinct. The body was on the point of dissolution, but the mind was unclouded.

" Salmon holds that letter which was the cause of your undoing, and I know where he keeps it. He has a house in the country in a lonely spot, three miles from the nearest station. He uses this house for meetings of his confederates, and in it he has stored most of his important papers and memoranda. There are no servants. A woman who lives a couple of miles away, I need hardly say a German by birth, comes in for a few hours every morning to tidy up. It is simply used as a meeting-place. In that packet you will find full instructions as to the exact spot and how to reach it. The letter is in the top drawer of a writing-desk in the small room facing the garden. He pulled it out from there and showed it to me a month ago when I was with him. I have given minute directions; you cannot fail to find the room."

Again he had to pause, again she had to wipe the perspiration from his brow before he could find the strength to proceed.

" Once get this letter in your possession, and you can snap your fingers at Salmon. I have no compunction in betraying him, for it was a blackguard's trick on his part to ensnare you. The ways and means you must work out for yourself. There are plenty of people who would steal into the house and secure that letter for you for a reasonable fee if you could get hold of them. I daresay Blunden would do it for a consideration, if you could find him. He will serve either side if he is bribed. As a last resource, go to a private detective; and he will help you."

He sank back exhausted, and then made a final rally. " Good-bye now, dear little girl. The anarchist,

the spy, Mattelli, wishes you all luck and happiness. His blessing may not be worth much, but there it is. You will have a message to let you know when I am gone."

He sank back again, and this time there was no rally. He had helped to ensnare her, but he had been an unwilling agent, and he had done his best to make amends. She stooped and imprinted a kiss of forgiveness on the pallid brow. She stole out of the room on tiptoe and summoned the nurse.

She drove back to the flat and told the wonderful news to Miss Farrell. Long and earnestly they discussed the situation.

In the evening a letter was brought by the same boy who had delivered the first. It was from the landlady, and simply said, " The poor signor passed away an hour ago."

She was free to avail herself of the chance he had given her. Salmon's vengeance could not reach him in the grave.

CHAPTER XXII

AT PARSONS GREEN

POOR old Papa Beppo had been conveyed to bed. The two women sat up till the small hours of the morning discussing the situation. Maudie Farrell, of course, had her one unfailing remedy: consult Charles Laidlaw and abide by his advice.

To this suggestion Claudia demurred. There was a vein of obstinacy in her character, also a little subtlety that barred the way to perfect frankness, due, no doubt, to certain racial instincts.

There was also in her mind a further thought. She had trespassed a good deal on Carlo's generosity. He had met the appeal in the noblest fashion. Might she not exceed the limit? Were her fortunes not becoming a little too involved?

"Maudie, you are a darling, but your ideas are just a little too cut-and-dried, a little too much—excuse me if I am rude—after your insular pattern. What, in effect, do you propose?"

"In a few words, that you should put the whole matter in the hands of your fiancé," answered Miss Farrell shortly. "What you will reveal is nothing new; it is only a result, a consequence of what has gone before."

Claudia shrugged her shoulders. "Do you think my Carlo, with his high position in the Foreign Office, with the bluest blood of England in his veins, will stoop to burgle a house in order to abstract a particular letter? Do you seriously propose that I should ask him to do this?"

Miss Farrell stuck to her guns. "I am not suggesting that he should take any particular line of action. Leave that to him."

She added, with some warmth, "Heaven knows, Claudia, you have suffered enough from your obstinacy in the past, because you would keep everything to yourself. Be wise in time; you have had one bitter experience. Take my advice now, as you ought to have taken it long ago. Tell Charles Laidlaw everything."

But while she was speaking, almost to heedless ears, a bright smile had stolen over Claudia's expressive face. An idea had occurred to her.

"Did I ever tell you I had a visit from Edward Langston at Rome? He sent up his card to me one night when I was in my dressing-room at the Salone Margherita."

No, Miss Farrell had not heard of that episode amongst the many confidences which had been exchanged between the two. Up to this moment it had escaped Claudia's memory. She briefly narrated the facts. How Edward Langston, a rogue but not utterly base, had been horrified at the turpitude of his half-brother, how he had left her, contrite and abashed, with the promise that he would always be her friend, that he would help her if ever she found herself in a difficulty.

" He is a scoundrel in a small way, a petty trickster," she concluded, " but he is not wholly bad-hearted or bad-natured. I am sure he would not be a black-mailer ; I don't think he would be a spy. I have just thought of him. It would appeal to his peculiar sense of chivalry to get back that letter which he really intended to restore to me."

Her friend was still doubtful. " I think my plan is the best, Claudia. This man is an adventurer, even if he has good points. Why trust one of his sort ? "

She looked at Claudia's face and read the answer. " I think I understand," she said quietly. " He is so much in love with you that you can subdue the base instincts in his nature. Perhaps you are right. He has no scruples. It might appeal to him as an adventure, from the dare-devil point of view, and he might win your forgiveness for the trick he played on you."

Claudia rose, and searched in the little desk where she kept her few important papers. Here she found the memorandum that Edward Langston had left with her. She smiled as she remembered that, in her indignation, she had been tempted to tear it up.

The name of the friend with whom she was to communicate if necessity arose was a very uncommon one —John Debrose. The address was a road in Parsons Green, an outlying district in the extreme west of London.

She was there early on the following morning. The taxi-driver, whom she liberally rewarded for his exertions, had managed to locate the house at last. Claudia had doubts of Mr. Debrose ; the choice of such a

difficult neighbourhood must be due to his fear of creditors or something worse.

She kept the taxi waiting. With superhuman ingenuity the driver had found his way in. She would have to get out. There was only one man who could accomplish the feat.

A slatternly women opened the door. She was not much over thirty, and not bad-looking, if she had sufficient time to make the most of her appearance. She was a pitiful specimen of the submerged lower middle-class woman who is at once wife, housekeeper, and drudge, toiling from morning to night at household duties, and into the small hours of the night stitching, mending, and patching.

"Is Mr. Debrose in, please?" asked Claudia in her gentle, winning way.

Mrs. Debrose regarded her with open hostility.

In the eyes of a woman, without a penny in her pocket, covered in the faded skirt and blouse of last year, a young girl dressed in the height of fashion, and alighting from a taxi, is not an exhilarating spectacle.

"Mr. Debrose is in. And what might be your business with him?" was the unconciliatory answer.

Claudia, with her quick intelligence, took in the situation at a glance. She spoke very gently to this derelict specimen of womanhood, who was old before she was young, old with care, hard work, and narrow means.

"I do not know Mr. Debrose at all. But I wish to communicate with Mr. Langston, and he told me that I should always find his address here. I understand Mr. Debrose is an old friend of his."

The slatternly woman opened the door wider. "Come in," she said, in the same ungracious voice. She ushered her visitor into a conventional apartment, known as the sitting-room. What a horrible chamber, thought poor Claudia. A case of stuffed birds in the window, a small round table in the centre upon which were a few books, some stiff hard chairs, ornamented with antimacassars. How British and how uncomfortable!

In a few moments Mr. Debrose appeared upon the scene. To judge from the appearance of his frayed cuffs, he was not in easy circumstances. There was little doubt that, at the moment of her arrival, he had been lounging in his shirt-sleeves. His coat had half of the collar turned up, which denoted a hasty assumption of the garment.

But he had splendid manners. He was all smiles and in a perfect flutter of geniality, making amends for his unresponsive wife. Hard work had knocked all this out of her many years ago.

"Delighted to see you. Any friend of dear old Teddie's is always welcome. We were boys at school together, and we are pals to this day."

He beamed as he spoke. Evidently he loved Langston like a brother.

Claudia regarded him curiously. He was still a youngish man, and his manner betokened satisfaction with life, in spite of the frayed cuffs and the squalid house. In girth, too, he had waxed, while the worn-out wife, wife and drudge, had waned. He was stoutish; she was thin as a whipping-post. He had exhausted her vitality to nourish his own.

Claudia explained her errand. She wished to communicate with Mr. Langston immediately, by telegraph if possible.

" Nothing easier," said Mr. Debrose. " I have forms here. Write your message ; I will fill in the address. You will excuse me taking this precaution, as I do not even know your name. And Teddie is a shy bird. There might be a few people whom he might not wish to hear from. You understand me ? "

Claudia bowed her beautiful head, with its wealth of glorious hair, which seemed to excite the admiration of Mr. Debrose. She filled the form and handed it to him. She felt her destiny was leading her into strange and wonderful places, but the days of concealment were past.

" You will be enlightened in a moment," she said, with her charming smile. " There is my full name and address."

Mr. Debrose rose and struck an attitude. She learned afterwards that he had acted in private theatricals. He bowed profusely.

" It is an honour to receive you in my poor abode, the celebrated Claudia Erba. To think you are a friend of dear old Teddie's ! He must be proud, too."

Then he recollected the business in hand, and hastened to the door. He shouted in a stentorian voice, " Albert ! "

An undersized, wizened boy of about twelve appeared in the doorway. He had the frowning, forbidding look of his mother. Claudia thought he did not regard his father with a too filial glance. She hastily laid five shillings on the paper.

"Will you take this for me as quickly as you can like a dear, good boy? You will keep the change for sweets."

She fancied that Mr. Debrose cast a rather covetous eye upon the five shillings. But he was too great a gentleman to make any comment. He knew when he was beaten. Thanks to circumstances which he was powerless to control, Albert the taciturn had scored this time.

"In an hour and a half, if you have luck, you will get the answer to that wire," he remarked. "Between ourselves, Teddie is not very far away. But you understand I never give away a pal."

Yes, Claudia understood as much as that, and expressed her conviction in gracious language.

Mr. Debrose was much fascinated by his visitor. He spoke hesitatingly.

"In two hours at latest you are sure to have an answer. If you could wait here I wonder if we could manage a little lunch? But I fear that is impossible; my wife is not a very good housekeeper; she would not be equal to an emergency."

Claudia thought of the poor, patient drudge who had opened the door and whom he was belittling in his arrogant attempt to keep up appearances. She hated him at that moment. And he was a friend, a life-long friend of Edward Langston. Yes, just the sort of friend Langston would have.

She thought a little. She had asked Langston to wire to both places—to Debrose and herself. If he did not want his address to be known—and he might have motives for concealment—he would only wire under cover to Debrose.

"I think we will not trouble your wife," she said. "But there are places in Putney where we can get lunch, in case he sends the wire to you. If you and Mrs. Debrose will be my guests, I shall be delighted. My taxi is waiting."

"My wife never goes out in the daytime," he replied hastily. "But I shall be only too pleased. In case the wire comes whilst we are at lunch, I will leave full instructions."

He disappeared into the back regions. Claudia fancied she heard a shrill voice raised in opposition. Perhaps Mrs. Debrose asserted herself at times. She could not be sure. The master of the house appeared presently, spick and span. He had a flower in his button-hole, and he had assumed spats, but the frayed shirt-cuffs still betrayed him to a critical eye.

"I am at your service," he said, with a profound and deferential bow.

They drove to the best restaurant in Putney. Claudia was curious about this creature. What was he? How did he live?

Mr. Debrose soon solved these problems himself. Claudia had offered him his choice of wine. He delicately hinted at something sparkling. She at once grasped the idea of champagne, and ordered a bottle of a well-known brand.

She sipped half a glass out of comradeship, and left the rest to her guest. He was not slow to avail himself of the opportunity afforded him. Under the genial influence of Pommery and Greno he grew garrulous and communicative. And, at the end, he became gloomy with reminiscence, and confidential.

" Good old Teddie has had his ups and downs, but he's never long before he strikes oil in something and somewhere. I haven't had his luck. I was on the road to success once, but things happened."

He paused and helped himself to the champagne. Claudia was curious about the man. That he was poor was evident ; she also surmised that there was something shady about him. His long friendship with Langston presupposed that. Birds of a feather flock together.

She hazarded a leading question. He seemed in a mood that conduced to self-revelation.

" You were in a good position once, Mr Debrose ? "

" I was, my dear young lady. A few years ago I was reckoned one of the smartest detectives in London. Suddenly the blow fell. I was informed that my services were no longer required. In a word, I was turned adrift."

Claudia opened her eyes and looked as innocent as she could. " How shameful ! And, I suppose, for no reason ? "

A shade of embarrassment stole over the melancholy countenance of the ex-detective. When he answered, his voice had a false ring in it.

" A trifling irregularity, Miss Erba, a trifling irregularity. But I admit it was my own fault. Since then I have been a rolling stone. I have turned my hand to many things, but the result has not been encouraging."

Claudia pricked up her ears at these revelations. He had been a detective ; it was possible that he might be useful after she had taken counsel with Langston

She also made a mental note to find out the nature of the " trifling irregularity " to which he had confessed.

Perhaps, if there was nobody else to fall back upon, he might regard breaking into another person's house and stealing an important letter as another " irregularity " of the sort that can be excused by the payment of a handsome fee. She must take care, however, that she did not strike another Joseph Blunden. Unscrupulousness in the employee is often a two-edged weapon that in the end wounds the employer.

Two hours had passed since they left Parsons Green. If Langston was going to wire to his friend's house, it was time for the reply. Claudia suggested their return.

But no telegram had come. She rose, feeling very disappointed. Mr. Debrose was sympathetic.

" Things often happen that way when one is in a hurry," he said philosophically. " Teddie may be out, away for the day, half a dozen things. If it comes after you have gone, I will send my son on with it or bring it to you myself."

Claudia thanked him, and laid a couple of pound notes on the table. She was sure Mr. Debrose was not a man troubled with any delicacy of feeling where money was concerned. His eyes glistened as he looked at the pieces of paper.

" You will keep these or give them to your son for the trouble you have undertaken on my behalf. If I hear nothing from Mr. Langston, which is very likely, I may have to avail myself further of your services."

He bowed profoundly. There was nothing would give him greater pleasure. Miss Erba, as he called her,

was a woman after his own heart, and knew how to do things handsomely. A champagne lunch and a couple of pound notes for three hours' work was not bad pay. He devoutly hoped to see her again.

She drove back in a state of great despondency. She was pretty sure in her own mind that Langston would respond to her summons in his own good time. But her nerves were so on the rack that the delay fretted her. Of course, there was just the possibility that he had wired to her direct. But, when she put the question to the maid who opened the door, the answer was that no telegram had arrived.

But her heart beat at the next words. "There's a gentleman in the drawing-room with Miss Farrell."

She entered the room, sure that she should find him there. Yes, it was Edward Langston right enough, tall, handsome, buoyant as ever.

He advanced and held out his hand, and this time Claudia did not refuse it, as she would have done on the last occasion they met.

"I have been waiting over an hour," he exclaimed. "I was at home when I got your message, and I thought I should get here before my telegram if I started at once."

"How foolish of me not to have thought of that contingency." She could not but feel grateful that he had so promptly obeyed her summons. "I took it for granted that you would answer to your friend at Parsons Green. I have been waiting there all the time."

He smiled happily. Even Miss Farrell softened a little towards him when she saw the genuine pleasure on his face. She knew all about him, but she was fain to

admit she had never met anybody who looked less like a rogue than this smiling man with the candid eyes and the frank face.

The arrival of Claudia was a great relief to him. For an hour Maudie had entertained him with a grave and chilling politeness that had got on his nerves. It was easy to guess the reason of her attitude.

She was a prim, straight-faced young woman, whom Claudia had taken into her confidence. Of course, she knew of the episode, and regarded him as a moral leper. He was not thin-skinned, but he felt very uncomfortable.

But Claudia's advent made him forget Miss Farrell and her obvious disapproval. He looked at the girl, whom he had once fallen in love with, with an expression in which admiration was tempered with sincere friendliness.

" Well, you have sent for me at last, and it means that I can help you in some way. I am glad, more than glad, that you have forgiven me so far. Tell me what you want me to do, and, if it is humanly possible, I will do it."

CHAPTER XXIII

"WAIT AND SEE"

MISS FARRELL rose. "You will be able to talk more freely if I leave you together," she said in her grave way. She left the room with a cold and distant bow to the man who looked honest enough, to outward appearance, but was at bottom a rogue and a swindler.

She was glad to get away from him, and he was equally delighted to be rid of her. She radiated a high morality that made him feel small and contemptible.

But for a few moments the situation was embarrassing when the two were left together. The girl could not quite forget her resentment, and he could not forget the trouble he had brought upon her. He had a notion that his visit to-day was due to the consequences of that trouble.

She tried to speak lightly; she did not feel she could touch on the real matter till they were more at ease with each other.

"And what are you doing now and where do you live? I don't want to know if you would rather not tell me."

But Langston seemed disposed to be quite open with her. "I am running perfectly straight, have done since Ic

I last saw you. Somehow the old life has lost its zest. I am a commission agent. I have no temptation to get hold of other people's money, because I don't have the handling of it. I am doing fairly well. I live in lodgings at Ealing with a good old landlady who makes me very comfortable and treats me like a son. I have shed my old skin with the name of Langston. Under my proper name of Johnson I have turned over a new leaf."

"And your friend, Mr. Debrose, is he leading a reputable life, too?" she asked. She was a bit curious about the shabby-genteel man at Parsons Green.

"Why do you ask?"

"Oh, it is no concern of mine, of course. But he told me a little of his history. He once had a good position and lost it through what he describes as a 'trifling irregularity.' I was wondering what he might mean by that phrase."

Langston, to call him by his old name, paused a few seconds before he answered.

"I don't know why I should beat about the bush with you. And you can guess that old Jack Debrose would not have remained my pal all these years if he had been a miracle of virtue. He went a bit crooked. He took tips from a set of sharpers he was set to watch and enabled them to get away. I don't think it was ever actually brought home to him, but there was enough suspicion to justify his dismissal."

"What has he done since? I take it he is not a very scrupulous person; that his scruples, if he has any, could quickly be silenced with a good fee."

Langston looked at her curiously Why was she

asking him these questions? Why was she curious as to the moral character of a man whom she had only known for a few hours? But he supposed he would learn the reason presently.

" His best friends couldn't deny that good old Jack is what you might call a bit ' shady,' " he said quite frankly. " You know enough of the world to recognise there are various degrees of shadiness. I am perfectly certain Jack wouldn't actually pick a man's pocket or commit a forgery or anything of that sort. But, no doubt, in smaller things his conscience is, let us say, elastic."

He added with an uneasy laugh, " As mine used to be, as it might be again, if I were on my uppers. After all, Claudia "—the name slipped out unawares—" it is poverty that makes us unscrupulous, money that makes us respectable."

She hardly heard his last philosophical remark. She was following the train of her own thoughts.

" I wonder if he would be useful to me? There is something I want done, and I don't suppose any honest man would do it."

Langston could hardly believe his ears. Was the world coming to an end? Claudia Erba, of all people, wanting something done that no very honest man would undertake!

But he did not show his astonishment. He only said, in quite a matter-of-fact tone, " I can't answer the question till I know what it is you want."

" Listen attentively, and I will tell you."

It was no part of her intention, as yet, to tell him the whole of her story. As long as possible she wished to

suppress that portion of it relating to her connection with Salmon's organisation.

She told him of the death-bed revelations made by an old friend, a Signor Mattelli, how the incriminating letter was in the drawer of a writing-desk in Salmon's house, and of her desire to get it into her own hands.

Langston, of course, was far too shrewd not to know that the whole truth had not been told him. But, for the present, he would let that pass ; he would not vex her with disturbing questions.

She had led him to suppose, on the night of his visit to her at the Salone Margherita, that the letter was in her possession, that she had bought it from his black-mailing half-brother. Well, that was evidently not the truth. It was in Salmon's keeping, and she was paying for silence in something different from gold. She might, or might not, tell him later the price that had been exacted from her.

She read Mattelli's description of the house, in a remote part of Essex, a few miles from Dovercourt, and then handed the letter to her visitor.

" I know every inch of the country ; I was born in Manningtree," he said when she had finished. " I'm pretty certain I know the house—three old labourers' cottages converted into a picturesque little sort of villa. Well, in effect, what you want me to do for you is to crack this crib, pick the lock of Mr. Salmon's drawer, and take away that letter."

" He has no right to it. He is a thief, really. Your brother stole it from you. Salmon bought it from your brother. It is no robbery to get it back."

" I quite agree." Langston smiled a little whimsically as he spoke. " Still, it is not exactly a picnic. Mind you, I say at once, I'll get that letter for you somehow. But, still, it isn't all plane sailing. It's a very lonely spot, and you say, or, rather, your friend says, the house is empty the best part of the day, except for occasional visits from the owner and his friends. Suppose they happened to turn up while I was in the middle of the job, it would be awkward for me."

Yes, Claudia admitted that not only it might, but would be very awkward.

" Now, I don't want to press you to tell me a word more than you think advisable. But I would like to know something of the character of this mysterious fellow whose ostensible occupation is that of variety agent, and, equally important, the character of his associates. People who meet in a lonely house, far away from any other human habitation, are engaged in some sinister enterprise. In a word, if they found they were discovered, would they stick at murder ? "

Claudia thought a long time before she spoke. " I believe Salmon would stick at nothing. I think I had better tell you all."

" It would be wiser, if you can bring your mind to it. Remember that if you don't tell me there's a pretty good chance I shall find it out. There will be other papers there besides your letter. If I have time to run through a few I shall get a pretty good idea of what is going on."

Yes, it was quite true Telling a part of the truth after all was rather futile. She had got over the hardest

part of her task when she had confided in Laidlaw. What was the use of feeling ashamed in the presence of a reformed adventurer, whose reformation might only last as long as his purse was full? He had said that poverty was the parent of unscrupulousness.

She told him the price she had made up her mind to pay for silence; she told him of the complicity of his half-brother, Blunden.

He made no comment. He was deeply grieved that the one blameworthy act, performed at his instigation, had entailed such tragic consequences. But regret and remorse were equally useless now. The best way of proving both was to do what she wanted.

"In one way it makes it easier," he commented. "They cannot take any steps; they won't want any light to be thrown upon that mysterious house. If the job can be done quickly, and I can get clear away, well and good. If they do choose that particular moment for one of their meetings and catch me, I don't think they'll hesitate at a trifle."

He thought for several minutes. He had no intention of backing out, but he wanted to consider the situation in all its bearings.

"I should like somebody with me," he said at length.

"I will go with you with pleasure. I could keep watch, and we could arrange some form of signals," she exclaimed eagerly.

A very soft expression came into his bold eyes. "No, you won't, little woman. I'm not going to risk a hair of your head in this business. I got you into the mess; I'll get you out of it."

"Maudie Farrell would go. We were talking it over

this morning before I started to see your friend. She made the offer herself."

Langston lifted his eyebrows. " She did, did she? I haven't taken a great fancy to her, but I like her better than I did a couple of minutes ago. But I don't want a woman, not in this sort of business. I must have a man."

" Mr. Debrose," suggested Claudia. " Somehow I've had a notion all through that he might be useful."

" Yes, Jack Debrose ; he'll fit into it perfectly. He's got nerves of steel and the resources of a cunning monkey. And he possesses one good quality ; he'll never go back on a pal."

" You are sure of that ? " asked the girl anxiously.

" I'd stake my life on it. All these shady chaps are a mass of contradictions, and most of them have got their own code of honour. Jack would swing rather than peach on a pal, or make dishonest money out of him."

Claudia thought he might be right. There rose before her, as she spoke, the vision of Clémentine Lafelle, facing the rifles of the firing-party. She might have been able to purchase her life if she had denounced her colleagues, but she had resisted the temptation and died game.

" Mind you, if you had gone to Jack on your own, I won't guarantee that he would have run perfectly straight. He might have settled a price with you to get the job, and then, when he had secured the letter, screwed a goodish bit more out of you before he parted with it. Mind you, I only say he might ; I don't absolutely say he would. But he's poor, and poverty is the mother of temptation."

Claudia thought, as she listened to him, there was another factor in temptation besides poverty—an overwhelming love such as she felt for Carlo.

" But he'll play no tricks of that kind on me. Besides, he won't have the chance. I daresay he'll force a window-latch and pick a lock more adroitly than I. But I shall get the letter, and it won't leave my custody till it is in yours."

" This will cost a lot of money, Mr. Johnson ; I must learn to call you by that name, but the old one comes so much easier. Of course, I will pay. Shall I give you something on account ? "

His face flushed a dull red. The man who had swindled his creditors without compunction was deeply wounded at the suggestion.

" Not a penny piece," he said emphatically. " I don't care what it costs ; that is my affair. I spend my own money on this job. I've got a tidy bit put by ; some of it quite clean, some, perhaps, just a little bit tainted. However, it can go in a good cause. Besides, it won't cost as much as you think. A motor-car for a couple of days, a bit of ' ready ' to old Jack. I've helped him through many a rough time. I shan't pay him extravagantly."

He held out his hand, and Claudia took it. He was certainly behaving nobly enough now.

" I'll see him to-night and talk it over, telling him as little as I can about the real position of affairs ; he must be told a certain amount, of course. I expect we shall be ready to start to-morrow. Now, I suppose, if we want to say anything to each other we had better communicate by letter. I'll stop with Debrose from

now till we start. You send to me there ; I'll send to you under cover to Miss Farrell. I take it there is a certain gentleman from whom this is to be kept for the present. And, if he should happen to pop in, you don't want him to find you in the company of an undesirable like myself. Of course, I have heard the name of the man you told me about. It is Mr. Laidlaw."

A tell-tale flush marked her cheek. " How did you find that out ? "

" Oh, I move about a bit, you know. And lots of people tell me a good deal about Claudia Erba."

" He knows all about the false testimonial, all about the espionage," she explained. " But this was not a thing I could ask him to undertake."

Langston was relieved to learn that she had confided in her lover. He knew next to nothing about Laidlaw, but he was a man, and he could be trusted to turn the tables on those scoundrels who had ensnared his sweetheart.

" Well, little woman, good-bye. I cannot tell you how glad I am that you have asked me to do you this service ; it will make things a little straighter between us. And, remember, I shall not fail."

He left, and in the nick of time, for Laidlaw presented himself five minutes later. If she had been caught, she was ready for the emergency. She would have introduced him, under his proper name of Johnson, as a friend of Maudie's. But she had deceived Carlo so much, she shrank from any further deception.

" Alone, my darling? that is well," he said, after he had kissed her fondly. He drew an envelope from his breast-pocket.

"Here is the information for our Teutonic friend," he said quietly. "Now, I will just dictate a few notes to you, and you will afterwards make a fair copy of them. When that is done, you can take the paper to Salmon as soon as you like."

When she had finished, she looked up at her lover. There was apprehension in her glance.

"Carlo, this is proper information—information that will be really useful."

"Mr. Salmon will be very pleased to get it. His reception of you will be quite cordial."

"And if it is traced to you?"

There was something strange and enigmatic about her Carlo, she thought. He spoke quite gravely and deliberately, but there was always the suspicion of that humorous smile playing round the corners of his mouth.

"Do not be afraid, darling. I can take care of myself."

With that she had to be content. She was very doubting, very fearful. But, surely, her Carlo must know what he was about?

"There is one thing I have to tell you," he said when he bade her good-bye. "I want you to leave this flat to-morrow for a few days. Don't ask me for any reasons. Be content to know it is essential to my plans."

She opened her eyes wide. He was developing with a vengeance some latent capacity for intrigue.

"Where are we to go to?" she faltered. "You include us all—Papa, Maudie, the maid?"

"Yes, all of you. Take as little as you can. Better

not take anything ; buy what you want. I've taken a little furnished flat at West Hampstead for a month. I don't think you'll want it more than a week. I wish you to go there separately. I'll take your father and the maid in a taxi to-night. Miss Farrell can go early to-morrow morning. Arrange an interview with Salmon in the afternoon, and tell him you are going down to Brighton for two or three days. Here is the address. Don't keep the paper, commit it to memory. We will dine together to-night, and I will give you further particulars. After dinner I will take your father and the maid. The place is all ready."

" Carlo, what does it all mean ? " she cried breathlessly.

He took her in his arms. " Have patience, dearest. You will know everything soon. I say to you again what I said before, ' Wait and see.' "

CHAPTER XXIV

THE HOUSE OF SURPRISES

ON the evening of that same day, Langston, to call him by the name under which he was first introduced into this story, was sitting with his friend, Jack Debrose, in the shabby sitting-room of the small house at Parsons Green. They were smoking, and a bottle of whisky was on a small table between them.

They had returned home after a very excellent dinner at Putney, the expenses of which had been defrayed by Langston. Debrose's fee for his assistance in the scheme had been arranged, and was of a nature to give complete satisfaction to that gentleman. A plan of campaign had been hastily drawn up. There were yet left a few details to be supplied by the superior experience of the ex-detective.

Langston had told him as little as he could, and Debrose, who knew when to hold his tongue, had not put any inconvenient questions. What theories or conjectures he formed on his own account did not matter to his friend. He was bound to conclude that Claudia Erba, like many other people, had a skeleton in her cupboard, and in consequence of that

had involved herself with a shady, possibly a criminal, gang.

"We won't sit up till too late," remarked the shabby-genteel man, "because we ought to be away from here by eight in the morning at latest. I ordered the car at half-past seven sharp. The missis will give us a bit of breakfast before we start. We can get a later meal on the road."

"You had no difficulty with the car?" asked his friend.

"Not the slightest. The handsome deposit you gave me settled that. Besides, the man who owns the place is a bit of a crony of mine. We have a glass together now and then at 'The Three Feathers.' I told him we were on a bit of detective business, and we hoped to be back the same night, but might be detained till the next day."

The men puffed away and drank their whisky. Debrose was thinking out the details. Presently he spoke.

"You say you know the country well?"

"Every foot of it, short cuts as well. Now, I've thought over it, I remember the house perfectly. I can guide you every inch of the way."

"You shall take us to within a mile of it, and we'll walk the rest. We shan't want the car too near the house in case the owners turn up and spot the number. Don't want the chauffeur to know too much either. Nuisance we've got to take him, but it can't be helped. I can drive right enough, but I haven't got a licence."

He was about to add something else when there

was a ring at the front door. Mrs. Debrose answered it, and presently put her untidy head in the sitting-room.

"A lady wants to see you for a moment, Mr. Johnson. I told her you were engaged. She asked if you would come out in the hall; she won't keep you a second."

Langston went out. Miss Farrell was standing by the open door; a taxi was waiting outside.

"Sorry to disturb you, but I have come with a message from my friend; she was afraid to trust it to an ordinary messenger. We are all leaving the flat to-morrow, and going for a few days to West Hampstead. I will tell you the address. Will you commit it to memory?"

Langston repeated it three or four times to be sure he had got it fixed in his mind.

"I shan't forget. Rather sudden, isn't it?"

"Yes, it was only determined after you left us. Mr. Laidlaw came in a few minutes after you had gone. He has insisted on it. I have no doubt he has very good reasons, but he won't tell us what they are."

"I am quite sure he has very good reasons, Miss Farrell," said Langston gravely. "I fancy Mr. Laidlaw is a man of considerable brains. I am very glad she made a clean breast of it to him. A woman is helpless against a gang of scoundrels like these."

Miss Farrell nodded her head, and with a swift "Good evening" had disappeared into her taxi before Langston could offer his escort. He returned to the

sitting-room. Debrose looked at him with an inquiring glance, but asked no questions.

Langston answered the glance. "Miss Erba sent a message by her friend, something she forgot to tell me this afternoon."

Mr. Debrose was satisfied, took a deep draught of whisky and soda, and pursued his meditations on the subject of their expedition of the morrow. They bore fruit presently in careful and well-considered speech. He was a born strategist.

"They'll find the letter gone, and, under the peculiar circumstances, they won't be able to raise any row about that; they won't want to set the police on our tracks. Still, I think we'll take masks with us in case of accidents. There is just the chance—a remote one, perhaps, but it is as well to be prepared for every emergency; one or two of them might drop in."

"Yes," agreed Langston. "That is a contingency that is always in my mind. You know how fate is always arranging these things against one. A week may pass and they won't come near. They are sure to choose the day we don't want them."

"In that case, the worst that can happen," said Mr. Debrose, speaking with an air of an old and seasoned campaigner, "a couple of 'barkers' won't come amiss. Two resolute men with a 'barker' each can hold up quite a small crowd without the necessity of plugging anybody."

Langston agreed. As quite a young man he had spent a few years in the Wild West. He fully understood the convincing nature of a pistol pointed full at your opponent's head. Debrose proceeded:

"We will take a flask of brandy, also one of whisky, as a matter of the most ordinary precaution." He paused a moment, and added, "Also a few handkerchiefs and a liberal allowance of some anæsthetic."

This last stroke of genius, this final coup of the experienced strategist, was a little beyond Langston's comprehension. He could only feel that he was very thankful he was taking Debrose with him on an errand which was certainly fraught with the possibilities of peril.

"That's a bit too deep for you, old man, isn't it?" laughed the ex-detective. "Well, I figure it out this way. They are not likely to come a thousand strong, are they? Suppose four of them surprise us, the 'barkers' will keep them at bay. If three of them come, I can use both hands; left or right makes no difference. I hold them while you——"

Langston understood. "Yes, I see. You cover them, while I render them insensible, one after the other. Hang it, Jack, I hope it won't come to that."

"You're too much of a sportsman, old chap, is that it? Well, from what I can guess, they're a pack of dirty dogs, and deserve to be treated like vermin. But, you see, what I am thinking of is this: if we are surprised we've got to make our escape. And I don't want that car to be identified if I can help it. I shall trust to you to run it into some little sheltered spot, where it is not likely to be seen."

"You may trust me for that, old man. In fact, I have just fixed on the particular spot," was Langston's reassuring answer.

They sat up, going over the old ground again for another hour. Then Mr. Debrose rose.

"Early hours, Teddie, old man. We've got a ticklish job on; we shall want all our nerve to-morrow. There's a good deal left in that bottle yet, and I'm loath to leave it. But business first and pleasure afterwards. We'll toddle, if you don't mind."

Langston obeyed with a good grace. In this particular drama Jack Debrose was the leading actor; he was taking a minor part.

The next morning they got into the car, after a hasty breakfast prepared by the patient Mrs. Debrose, and drove through the cool morning air.

The ex-detective was calm and unconcerned and disposed for conversation. His professional experience had inured him to strange and thrilling adventures. Langston was thoughtful and preoccupied.

He was no coward, and he did not entertain the slightest desire to back out of the enterprise. He had given his word to Claudia, and he would keep it. And he owed her a heavy debt for what she had suffered through her brief association with him.

But something in him revolted against the whole thing. He was unscrupulous enough, and he had never shrunk from the hundred-and-one tricks of petty rascality; if necessity compelled, would not shrink from them again. And it was not housebreaking with a felonious object, rather with the intention to right a wrong.

Still, stealing into another man's house and picking the lock of his desk, like any common thief out for plunder, struck some latent chord of morality in

his easy-going nature. He had to tell himself a dozen times that the end justified the means.

He turned to his companion, and spoke to him in a low voice, hardly above a whisper, so that the chauffeur, a stolid-faced man, should not overhear.

"Have you done anything of this kind before, Jack? I mean, of course, with an honest object in view?"

An enigmatic smile spread over Mr. Debrose's genial countenance. "I've done some funny things in my time on behalf of private clients, old man, but I don't care to say much about them. Stiffer things than this, too, where you ran a big risk if you were spotted. It's easy to see you don't take kindly to the job."

"No, I admit I don't," replied the other honestly. "Still, it's no use talking about it; it has got to be done. All the same, I shall be thankful when it's over."

They had breakfasted hurriedly and lightly. The swift motion, the cool, refreshing air, made them hungry. Within twenty miles of their destination they came upon a picturesque little inn. Debrose immediately caught sight of it, and suggested a halt.

"I vote we turn in here and get a bite, Teddie. Eggs and bacon, by choice, a real rustic dish, with a taste of mellow cheese to follow. We'll have a smoke after and then push on. We shall get there just about the quiet time of the day, when everybody is feeding."

They turned into the old-fashioned hostelry, and

ordered their lunch. Mr. Debrose gave some sound advice on the subject of liquor.

"We'll have a couple of whiskies with our food, just one with our smoke. Enough to put a bit of heart into us, not enough to disturb our mental processes."

In his way Debrose was a very level-headed fellow. In his leisure moments he was not averse from the bottle, and had been known to exceed when in genial company. On duty he exercised a Spartan power of self-control.

Fortified by the food and the judicious amount of alcohol, just sufficient to stimulate and induce cheerful thoughts, Langston grew more animated. The enterprise to which he had engaged himself lost something of its repellent aspect.

Debrose noticed the change in him with satisfaction; he preferred a light-hearted comrade.

"Time to push on," he said, when they had knocked the ashes out of their pipes. "Get up beside the chauffeur and stop him at any likely spot about a mile from the house, where we can hide the car snugly. Tell him to go about fifteen miles an hour; that will do us comfortably."

Guided by Langston, the car went on at a steady pace. Knowing every inch of the country, he chose the less frequented roads, and was rewarded for his precautions by meeting with only two objects—a farmer's boy and a small butcher's cart from one of the neighbouring villages.

He gave the word to the chauffeur, and they slowed down. Langston jumped from the seat.

"Take the car a few yards down that lane yonder,

round the bend to the right. Stop there till we come back to you, I expect in the inside of an hour. Don't be seen if you can help it. You know we're on a bit of detective work. Mum's the word."

The stolid-faced chauffeur grinned, pulled out his pipe, filled it, and proceeded to obey orders.

Langston took his friend by the arm and led him in the opposite direction.

"There's a short cut across the fields. There's four or five acres of land at the back of the garden proper. We'll approach the house that way."

Mr. Debrose seemed to be enjoying himself. The sun was shining brilliantly, and the air was very sweet with the scents of the late summer merging into autumn. It was a vivid change from the atmosphere and the drab streets of Parsons Green.

They walked at a rapid pace, carrying the bags containing the masks, pistols, skeleton-keys, and flasks of brandy and whisky which the detective had insisted should be part of their equipment.

To the ordinary passer-by, if they met one, they would present the appearance of commercial travellers, tramping from one village to another.

They scrambled through a broken gap in the wood fencing that marked the confines of this house of mystery, entered a garden that had been allowed to run to seed, and found themselves at the back of the straggling little house which, according to Langston's recollection and Signor Mattelli's directions, rejoiced in the name of "The Laurels."

Mr. Debrose surveyed it with his usual air of critical detachment.

"Rum little crib. Rather picturesque. A bit stuck on here and another bit there. Looks as if it had been made out of bits."

Langston explained that the present structure was an amalgamation of three small cottages.

"That accounts for it, Teddie, old man. Well, we can get in here as easy as falling off a log. But I'll just creep round a bit and peep in at the windows."

This he did, and returned to his companion, who was longing to get inside, do his work, and get out again.

Mr. Debrose selected the kitchen window, as affording the easiest means of entry. He produced from his bag a small but serviceable instrument. In a very brief space the window latch was forced back, the lower window flung open. The two men stepped over the sill.

Debrose looked round with the trained eye of the detective, observant of small details.

"The old woman keeps it tidy," he remarked. "Everything in its proper place and no dust lying about. I should say she has been here this morning. Now for the room we want, facing the front garden."

The door was opened; it was a cosy little chamber, inexpensively but neatly furnished. Two big easy-chairs faced each other. In the window, facing the light, stood a big roll-top desk.

Debrose pointed his finger at it. "That's our mark, I think," he said, in his quick, slangy way. "That's the drawer on the right, according to the instructions given you. I'll get to work in a minute. But before I start we'll just take one little precaution. I don't

suppose we shall be five minutes over the job, but we'll be prepared."

He opened the bags, produced the masks, three bunches of skeleton-keys, and two pistols. They put on the masks, Langston held the pistols. Debrose flung the bunches of keys before the desk and knelt down on the floor.

"Keep a sharp look-out while I am working. It's rather an exposed position. I'll be as quick as I can."

He was a rapid worker. In less than three minutes the lock was picked and the drawer pulled out.

Mr. Debrose rose from his knees, an air of pardonable pride suffusing his countenance.

"Not bad time for an amateur cracksman, Teddie. Now it's your hand. Give me the 'barkers,' rummage the drawer, and I'll do sentry go."

Langston took his friend's place and hunted through the papers. There were plenty of them, piles of memoranda, evidently written in code. It was a little time before he came to an envelope, on which was scribbled in pencil "Letter. C.E."

He guessed at once the initials stood for Claudia Erba. He tore open the envelope, and the testimonial signed by the spurious Comtesse de Beville was revealed. How well he remembered the trouble he had taken to overcome Claudia's scruples!

He put it in his pocket. "That's all I want, Jack. It's been pretty easy. Let's get out of this as soon as we can."

"What about the other papers?" queried Debrose, speaking with the instinct of a man who never lets a chance slip. "Anything useful? These chaps have

got something to hide. I don't know the nature of it. I have more than a suspicion that you do. Don't think I'm touting for confidence. You've paid me handsomely, and I'm content to stop at that. But I'm acting as your adviser in the matter. If you take one paper away, take a few more while you're about it. 'As well be hung for a sheep as a lamb,' you know."

The same thought had occurred to Langston. But somehow he had shrunk from the idea. This was not quite his kind of roguery. It did not seem playing the game, according to the canons of fair play that exist amongst rascals of various types.

"They're in cipher; what good would they be?" he said.

"What's written in cipher can be deciphered, if you've got enough of it," answered Jack Debrose, a little impatiently. "Take a pile of them, old man. We can settle afterwards whether they are any good or not."

Langston did as he was told, and stuffed a bulky little parcel in his pocket. Yes, he quite admitted these memoranda might be useful. But Debrose, with his keen but narrow vision, did not guess all. There was, no doubt, enough in that small packet to incriminate Salmon and his gang, but Claudia had got to be kept out of it. This was just what he did not care to explain.

Debrose smiled approvingly as Langston stuffed the packet of loose memoranda in a side pocket. He hated to see a man miss his chances.

In another moment he was the alert man of action.

" Take the ' barkers,' Teddie. I'll lock up this drawer and leave the place neat and tidy. We'll leave it as we found it, fair wear and tear excepted, as they say in agreements. I put back the latch of the kitchen window. We'll make our exit by the back door, when I've finished this little bit. A very successful operation, old man."

Langston had felt a great strain on him all through the brief performance. He was not quite in a mood to appreciate his friend's pleasantries.

" For heaven's sake get on with it, Jack, and don't chatter. It may be a joke to you, but I tell you it's devilish serious to me. Get on with it."

Mr. Debrose deftly locked the drawer and stood up. Evidently his nerves were under much better control than those of his friend. He looked through his mask at the overgrown garden in front of him, and he fell into a meditative mood.

" Teddie, old man, you've got the jumps, I can see ! There's no danger ; everybody is feeding. It's a dear little spot, isn't it ? How happy I could be here with, say, five hundred a year. I must look over the place ; I shan't keep you five minutes. I just want to take the picture of it home to-night for the missis and the boy—something to look forward to in the future."

He had darted away before Langston could stop him. That was the worst of Jack Debrose. He would be iron-headed for six days in the week and then, on the seventh, some warp of sentiment would take hold of and twist the man.

Langston's one idea was to get out of the place, his object achieved and complications happily absent.

Why was this sentimental fool thinking of old age and sylvan retreats at such a moment?

And then suddenly a hoarse shout came from Debrose, apparently from the floor above:

"Teddie, old man, come quick. Something horrible —horrible!"

CHAPTER XXV

WHAT DEBROSE DISCOVERED

LANGSTON bounded up two stairs at a time. The door of a bedroom stood open. Debrose was standing just inside the room, his face white, a shaking hand pointing to the bed.

"Teddie, old man, look. Murder, or attempted murder, at the least. I'm all to pieces."

Langston was by now the cooler and more self-possessed of the two. His had not been the first shock of discovery.

He advanced towards the bed, whither his friend's shaking hand pointed him. He saw a terrible object—a man bound tightly with knotted ropes, a gag in his mouth. A strange sight on a summer's day in free England.

He tore the gag away and peered over the unconscious and recumbent form, and recoiled with a cry of horror. The man, bound and gagged in this house of horror and mystery, was his half-brother, the spy and blackmailer known as Joseph Blunden.

Debrose was still white and shaken. Langston took the lead at once.

"Quick—a knife to cut these ropes. And bring up a flask of brandy."

Debrose, partially restored to his usual practical self by the imperative command, rushed downstairs, rummaged in the bags, and brought back what was wanted.

Langston cut the cords which had been drawn with a cruel tightness, and rubbed the face and lips of the unconscious man with the raw spirit. He forced open the closed mouth, and poured a little of the brandy down his throat.

In a few moments Joseph Blunden came to himself with a long shuddering sigh. He opened his tired eyes, and recognised his preserver.

"Ted," he said, in a faint voice.

Langston bent over him. It was not so many months ago he had told Claudia that if he met his half-brother on that night, when his passion was at white heat, he would kill him for the wrong he had done her and the foul trick he had played upon himself.

Strange contradictions of human nature. Joseph Blunden was at his mercy now; and, instead of killing him, he wanted to save his life.

He turned to Debrose. "Jack, old man, do you mind leaving us for a minute? There's a lot behind all this I haven't told you. I daresay you guess somebody else is concerned in it—somebody I don't want to bring in."

Yes, Mr. Debrose understood. "A woman, of course," he said laconically. "Well, you want me to scoot for a few minutes. Right, I am off. I shall keep watch in the front room. Call me when you're ready. Later, tell me as much as you like, or nothing at all. We're pals, old man; you've helped me out of many a

tight corner. I shall never ask any questions, you understand."

Langston had dropped his mask as soon as he recognised his half-brother. The two men regarded each other steadfastly—two men belonging to the great criminal army, but different in degree: the one a rogue, the other a base scoundrel who would hesitate at nothing.

"What is the meaning of it, Joe?"

Blunden's voice was very faint. "The swine ran me down; they caught hold of me in a little side street where I thought I was safe, flung a rag over my face that rendered me insensible, and brought me down here."

"Salmon and his gang?" queried Langston, knowing that he had hit upon the truth.

"Yes, Salmon and his gang. I wonder how you know that? They held a sort of mock court-martial on me last night; it was a special sitting—Salmon, Lewis Levi, and a woman, a Miss Zerbstein. They condemned me to death."

"Why did they condemn you to death?" asked Langston sternly.

The shifty eyes lowered before the steadfast gaze bent upon him.

"A little more brandy, old man, for the love of heaven. I have been starving for hours. I heard the old German woman poking about the place this morning, but she never came near me. I couldn't cry out and she wouldn't have come if I could."

Langston administered the brandy and repeated the question. "Why did they condemn you to death?

Before you answer, let me tell you I know a great deal. Salmon and his gang are spies, and you are—or were—a member of the gang."

Blunden was very weak for want of food, but he was rapidly coming to himself.

"Oh, you know that, too, do you? Well, they had got an idea into their heads that I was not running quite straight with them."

"In other words, that you were selling yourself to the other side, eh?" queried Langston grimly.

He was not over-scrupulous himself, but the callousness of his half-brother made his gorge rise.

Blunden smiled a sickly smile. "Well, all's fair in love and war. I had been trading both ways a little bit. They got wind of it somehow, so they brought me down here and tried me in proper form, as if they were a High Court or something or other."

"And, of course, you had no defence?"

"Not much. The evidence was a bit too clear. Salmon, who is a violent sort of person, was for shooting me out of hand; so was Levi. Miss Zerbstein, who is rather more refined in her methods, suggested slow starvation. She carried the day. They bound me and gagged me. It was a streak of bad luck for them that you found me."

Langston shuddered. "The inhuman fiends! And if you had died, how would they have disposed of your body?"

Blunden waved his hand in the direction of the outer garden. "There are five acres there. Easy to dig a hole. Who would miss Joseph Blunden, adventurer and spy?"

" And heartless blackmailer," said Langston under his breath, as he thought of the anguish that had been inflicted on Claudia.

He rose up in his righteous wrath and faced the callous creature, in whose veins ran the same blood.

" Joseph, you are not fit to live, and you are not fit to die. But because we have a common father I must do something for you. Tell me, I suppose you would like to be revenged upon these miscreants ? "

A wolfish grin convulsed Blunden's cadaverous face. " If I could bring one of them to the gallows I would go cheerfully myself," he said vehemently.

Langston could hardly hide his repulsion for the wretched creature who claimed kindred with him. But humanity prevailed. He spoke quite gently.

" Come downstairs. I must get you out of this place as soon as possible. I've got a car waiting ; I'll get you a meal on the road."

Blunden followed him down the stairs. " What the devil are you doing here ? " he asked. " What's your little game ? "

Langston flashed on him an indignant face. " Hold your tongue ! " he thundered. " What right have you to ask me questions ? I'm not sure I'm right now in saving you from the death to which they condemned you. You were always a cur—you would always bite the hand that fed you."

Blunden attempted a feeble snigger. " Why should the pot call the kettle black, old man ? You were crooked in your own way. Let us be lenient to each other."

Langston made no reply to this taunt. He led him

tottering relative into the front room, where Debrose was keeping a wary eye upon possible intrusion, his mask on, a pistol in each hand in case of emergencies.

"Jack, old man, I haven't taken you too much in my confidence," he cried in his impetuous way. "But I'll make amends now. This is my half-brother—I am not proud of the relationship, I can assure you. He was a member of this gang. They found out he was playing the double on them. They condemned him to die of slow starvation instead of killing him out of hand."

Mr. Debrose had recovered from his shock by now. He was again the alert man of affairs. He bent upon Blunden his keen, searching glance, and formed his own conclusions as to his moral qualities.

"I believe I perfectly understand," he said in his quiet, emotionless voice. "You don't rejoice greatly in your new-found relative, but blood is thicker than water. You have found him in sore straits, and you think the punishment was greater than the crime."

"Yes, blood is thicker than water," said Langston slowly. "I shall take him back to Ealing, nurse him into health and strength, and, I suppose, turn him again on the world, with renewed vigour, to work further mischief."

The object of these complimentary remarks said nothing. He only swayed to and fro a little unsteadily through weakness. Debrose observed his failing power and administered more brandy.

"I say, Jack, old man, he's awfully weak for want of food. And the car is the best part of a mile away.

Do you think he can walk it? I reckon we shall have to carry him."

But Blunden, fortified by the spirit, developed amazing courage. "Promise me that you will help me to pay back these swine in their own coin, and I will walk back to London, every step of the road if necessary."

He had just finished his sentence when they heard the tinkle of the telephone. In a moment or two it stopped.

Langston turned to his relative. "What does that mean? You know the ways of this infernal house."

"It's Thursday, isn't it? I had lost count of the days. It is the day of their usual meeting. One of them generally comes down to get things ready for the others. I suppose he is coming earlier than usual to take a look at me."

Again Debrose became the leader, the acute strategist.

"Put on your mask, Teddie, at once."

It was only just in time, for almost as he ceased speaking a figure came slowly up the front garden. They retreated hastily to the back of the room, so as not to be seen through the window.

"It's Lewis Levi," said Blunden, in a voice of concentrated hatred.

Langston cursed his foolishness in having wasted so much time in talking to his brother. As soon as he had freed him from his bonds he ought to have carried him away there and then, and waited for explanations till they were in a place of safety.

"We're in for it now, Jack," he said ruefully.

Debrose displayed great coolness. He had been momentarily upset by the horrible sight upstairs and the inhuman villainy it suggested. But now, at the prospect of facing Levi, his nerves were steady.

"Have you any idea what time the others will be here?" he said, turning to Blunden.

"A little past five is the usual time. They bring some cold provisions with them and have a meal before they break up. Sometimes they stop the night, but very rarely."

It was a few seconds before they heard the key turn in the front door. Levi had evidently been on a tour of inspection round the back. But there would be nothing there to excite his suspicions. The latch of the kitchen window had been shot back directly after the men had entered.

Debrose stole on tiptoe and closed the door which had been standing open. He spoke to Langston.

"It was shut when we came in," he whispered. "Now, we'll all stand just here, so that when he opens it we shall be hidden behind. As soon as he is well in, you, Teddie, slam it to, and before he can make a movement I'll cover him."

Langston was a little pale with excitement, and he felt that the weakness of Blunden might be a rather serious handicap to their after-movements. But he was calm and confident. As long as they had only Levi to contend with there could be no doubt of the result. Debrose and he were both powerful men, and the brief glimpse he had caught of the man coming up the path showed him to be elderly and not of a fighting build. If he showed fight he would

not have much chance against either of them, muc
less the two.

Still, it was a thrilling moment, and a person
Levi's character and associations was not likely to g
about unarmed. If he was desperate, and reco
nised that the game was up, he might get a shot i
first. It all depended really on Debrose's coolne
and rapidity of action.

The footsteps came slowly down the passag
Debrose whispered rapidly to his old friend.

"We've got the advantage, and you may trust m
to hold it. Keep calm and follow my lead."

The door was opened, and as suddenly pluck
from Levi's grasp and flung to. Before he had tim
to think, the heavy-faced Jew, moneylender and sp
was looking down the barrel of a revolver.

"Hands up, Mr. Levi, please. And don't ke
me waiting. My friend and I are rather in a hur
to be off. So the sooner we dispose of you the better

The last phrase was a very sinister one, and it ha
the effect Debrose had intended. For a second t
Jew hesitated, and his right hand stole towards t
side pocket of the rough tweed jacket he was wearin
Then he thought better of it and placed both han
behind him.

"That's better," said the ex-detective, in a mo
cordial tone. "Now, Teddie, old man, just go ov
him, will you, and take away anything dangerous
You'll find a 'barker' in one of his pockets, I bet."

Langston searched where Levi's hand had stol
in his first moment of indecision, and pulled out
formidable-looking weapon.

Up to the present Levi had kept his eyes on Debrose, or, rather, Debrose's mask. Suddenly his glance moved round and met Blunden's gaze, full of hatred. His jaw dropped, his face went livid. The spectacle of the man standing upright, whom he believed to be slowly starving to death, took the last inclination to show fight out of him.

He moistened his dry lips and forced out the words, "What are you going to do with me?"

Debrose thought he would play with him a little longer.

"We haven't quite made up our minds yet. I fancy my friend Blunden's idea is that we should repeat the scene of last night, with the characters changed, we being the court-martial and you the prisoner."

Of course, Blunden had made no suggestion of the kind, but his eyes gleamed with a fierce joy.

"He deserves it, the dirty, murdering dog," he cried vindictively.

Levi's feelings at the moment can be well imagined. But, considering all things, he bore himself pretty bravely.

"Whatever you intend to do get it over quickly," he said in a low voice.

Debrose did not answer this last entreaty. He was going to keep his victim on the rack for a little longer. He turned to Langston.

"Teddie, will you go upstairs and fetch those pieces of rope? We'll tie him up a bit while we are thinking it out. I'm rather tired of holding this pistol."

Langston followed the instructions. He had cut

the rope anyhow, but there were a couple of long pieces that would come in handy. In a few seconds Levi's arms and legs were secured firmly, and he was deposited on a chair.

Then, when Langston had made him secure, he drew his friend aside and whispered in his ear, "For heaven's sake, let's get out of it, Jack! Leave the fellow here; he can't move. If my brother is going to turn King's evidence, the lot can be collared to-morrow. Let's make tracks and get back."

Debrose appeared to hesitate. He whispered back, "I never like leaving anything to chance, Jack. He's helpless enough, no doubt of that. But you never know what may happen. This old German woman might come in five minutes after we've cleared off and untie him. Mind you, I'm going on the assumption that we intend to hide our tracks. Of course, you and Blunden may take a line of action that would render that unnecessary. But I'm working at the moment on that assumption."

"Well, perhaps you had better work on that assumption for the moment. The situation is so full of complications, I don't know what we may do to-morrow when we've thought it all over. My brother has got the hot fit to-night; he would hesitate at nothing to get home on them. He may have a cold fit later, when he weighs the consequences to himself."

"Good, now I understand where we are," said Debrose, in his calm, unruffled way. "In that case, I'll give him a little of the soothing syrup which I took the precaution to bring away with me."

He went to his own bag, took out a large-sized

handkerchief and a bottle. Then he crossed over to the bound man and stood in front of him.

"We're not going to shoot you, Mr. Levi; murder isn't a side line with us. And I think it quite possible the police will settle Mr. Blunden's little account with you before many hours are over."

Levi raised his gloomy eyes to the mask that concealed Debrose's features. Even in this trying moment of uncertainty he could not help feeling curious as to how these men had got there.

"What are you, just common housebreakers?"

"Something of the sort," replied Debrose easily. "But I'm afraid I haven't much time to satisfy your quite natural curiosity. I will tell you this much: we want to get away as quickly as possible, and this gentleman, whom you have tried to murder, is in a state of weakness that hampers him as a travelling companion. Now, for sufficient reasons, I am going to apply something that will put you comfortably to sleep for some little time. It will have no harmful effect; you will probably feel a little dizzy when you wake, that is all."

He began to put the contents of the bottle on the handkerchief, Levi watching every motion with fascinated eyes, from which he could not keep an expression of dread. What if this calm, smooth-tongued fellow was playing with him, if he were giving him something that would send him to sleep for ever?

His preparations finished, the ex-detective laid the handkerchief over his face.

"Now, don't struggle, I beg of you. I assure you I am only going to send you into a brief slumber.

As soon as you are off we shall untie these ropes and place you on that sofa yonder. If, by any chance, your friends should not turn up, you'll be a free man as soon as you wake. There's just one little thing I want you to do for me. If Mr. Salmon does arrive, as no doubt he will, tell him that the two gentlemen whom you met accidentally to-day would like him to remember that he's not the only clever person in the world."

A few minutes later Levi had succumbed to the influence of the powerful drug. They undid the ropes and laid him on the sofa, went into the hall, removed their masks, and put them in the bags.

"And now for the car and home," said Debrose, in a voice of great cheerfulness. "I think we'll go back the same way we came. Do you think you can manage to struggle along, Mr. Blunden?"

CHAPTER XXVI

TRICKED!

JOSEPH BLUNDEN gave them very little trouble. The liberal amount of spirit with which they had dosed him had infused in him an artificial vitality. Debrose had feared they would have to carry him, but he kept pace with them bravely. The fire of revenge was burning fiercely within him.

The stolid-faced chauffeur was waiting for them in his secluded corner. They were only half an hour later than he had expected. He knocked the ashes out of his pipe and stood to attention.

Two passengers had come down, three were returning. He noted the fact, but it did not interest him greatly. They had told him they were on a bit of detective work. Joseph Blunden looked rather wild-eyed and dishevelled. Perhaps he was a lunatic they had snatched out of a private madhouse, wrongfully detained by designing relatives. Such things had been heard of.

Debrose and Blunden occupied the inside. Langston sat by the side of the chauffeur.

"Let her rip for all she's worth," he said to the stolid-faced man. "We want to get back to London as quickly as possible. There's no danger of police traps about these quiet roads."

They went on at a rattling pace for the next twenty-five miles. Langston halted the car at a small inn—not the one they had lunched at on their journey down; he was too careful for that. He opened the door.

"Come out, Joseph. You must have something light here; I'd give you a full meal with pleasure, but it might be dangerous after that long fast. And we must not lose time. I want to get you home as soon as possible and send for the doctor."

Blunden's momentary vitality had exuded. The shock to the system, the knowledge that he had been condemned to a slow and lingering death, had told on him. He descended from the car with difficulty.

"Ted, old man, I believe those fiends have done for me," he muttered in a faint voice. "I wish I had had strength to snatch your pistol. I'd have done for that old swine, Lewis Levi." The spirit of revenge was still hot within him.

Langston hurried him into the inn. He ordered three raw eggs to be beaten up with milk in a big tumbler, with a liberal allowance of brandy. That would keep him going till medical aid could be procured.

In the car, Joseph Blunden, overcome with weakness and the spirit he had consumed after his long fast, slumbered peacefully.

Debrose leaned across, and whispered to his friend, "Not a very robust constitution, is it, old man? It's shock that must have knocked him over. The starvation, after all, was only a few hours."

Langston whispered back, "His mother died early of consumption; she was a foreigner. My father

was sound as a bell. He met his death by an accident ; but for that, he would have been alive to-day."

"I see." Mr. Debrose relapsed into silence. He was not fond of pressing impertinent questions.

When they had got a little way into London, Langston halted the car again.

"You'll take this back," he explained. "I'll hail the first taxi that passes and run him down to Ealing. My landlady has got a spare room, and she loves nursing. I'll see you some time to-morrow, to settle up. Here's a tenner to go on with."

Blunden, still comatose, was hoisted into the taxi by the two men. Arrived at Ealing, he had awakened a little from his lethargy, and muttered incoherently. He was evidently light-headed.

The landlady, a kindly-looking woman of middle age, opened the door, and cast a startled glance upon the strange spectacle that met her eyes.

"Bless my 'eart, Mr. Johnson, what is this?"

Langston explained briefly: "A new lodger, Mrs. Baker ; my half-brother. He's in a bad way, poor chap. I'll explain everything later. Put him to bed as quickly as you can. I'm going to fetch a doctor."

He did not know much about doctors himself. He was a strong, healthy man ; it was years since he had had to resort to medical aid.

He knocked at the first house on the door of which was a brass plate. It was a small house, and the plate was very new. Evidently the abode of a new-comer, a young practitioner who was embarking on a suburban practice.

He was shown into the consulting-room, a circumscribed den ten feet by eight, with some shabby chairs and a row of bottles containing drugs in a case in a corner of the room. A young man with spectacles was standing in the middle of the poverty-stricken apartment. When he spoke, it was with a strong Scotch accent.

In two minutes Langston had explained his errand, and taken the young man with him to his lodgings. In this short time Blunden had been put into bed by the energetic Mrs. Baker, and had relapsed into torpor. She was a kind and motherly soul; weakness and suffering appealed to her at once. She was leaning over the bed and watching him anxiously.

"Eh, but he's very bad, poor lad," she said, when the two men entered the room.

The young Scotch doctor made a thorough and business-like examination, and sounded him all over. Once or twice the patient opened his tired eyes and closed them again swiftly.

Mr. Macnaughton put his stethoscope back in his pocket. "He's old before he's young. Everything is wrong with him; heart, lungs, and liver. He may go out like the snuff of a candle. Had a sudden shock, I presume?" he said.

The eyes were very keen behind the disfiguring spectacles. Langston hardly knew what to answer. He was disinclined to trust in a stranger, but he had to say something.

"It's rather a long story. He is my half-brother. I came across him under very peculiar circumstances this afternoon. He has, undoubtedly, had a severe

mental shock, and, I fear, of late, he has not been very well nourished."

Mr. Macnaughton nodded. "He is very low. When he wakes, feed him with eggs beaten up in milk. But I'm afraid of the nervous prostration and the low vitality."

"Should he have a nurse?"

The doctor looked at the bonnie, kindly Mrs. Baker, and said:

"This good lady has got a nurse's face. If she could sleep in this room to-night, it might be saving you expense. And, honestly, at the moment, I don't know where I could put my hand on a trained nurse."

Mrs. Baker was only too ready. "I'll look after the poor creature. Eggs in milk, you say. I've plenty in the house."

"That's good." The young man shook hands awkwardly, and said, "I'll look in the last thing to-night."

Mrs. Baker was a very capable woman. As soon as the doctor was out of the house, she took the situation firmly in hand.

"Now, Mr. Johnson, you stay here for ten minutes in case the poor fellow wakes. I'll just run downstairs and set my daughter on a bit of dinner for you."

At the end of ten minutes she bustled up again and drove him out of the room. She would do everything that was required, and men, she told him, were useless in illness.

He ate his dinner, and went up to peep at Blunden. He was still sunk in that heavy sleep.

It was quite early yet, and there was a long evening

in front of him. He could not employ it better than by going over to West Hampstead. He wanted Claudia to have that letter ; at any rate, he wanted her to know that he had succeeded in his mission.

It was just possible that Laidlaw might be there, but he was prepared for that. He would ask to see Miss Farrell, and learn from her if the coast was clear. If it was not, he would leave a message for Claudia to meet him in town to-morrow, so that he might surrender the document into her own keeping. He was not going to trust it to a third person.

Miss Farrell received him, and explained that Mr. Laidlaw was with his fiancée. Langston was rather disappointed. He was full of the strange things that had happened during the eventful day, and he wanted to tell them to the one person whom they would interest most profoundly. He could not unbosom himself at any length to this young woman, who so obviously disapproved of him.

He took his leave quickly, after appointing a place of meeting on the morrow. " Good night, Miss Farrell. You will explain to her that I have a kind of superstition I cannot part with that letter except to herself. Otherwise I would leave it with you."

Maudie quite understood—rather approved his caution, in fact. Her smile, as she bade him goodbye, was a trifle less wintry. He was certainly atoning very nobly for the past.

Claudia was chatting with her lover, who had dined with her at the new flat. As she was supposed to be at Brighton, it was not wise for her to be seen in town.

She had called on Salmon that morning, and, assuming an air of triumph, had told him she was in a position to re-establish herself in his good opinion. She gave him a circumstantial account of certain conversations with Laidlaw, the salient features of which she had noted on the paper she handed to him.

She could see he was still very suspicious, but his brow cleared as he read. When he had finished, she said in the most innocent voice.

"I hope that is really useful to you."

His tones were almost genial as he answered:

"You have done quite well; I shall act upon it at once. I did intend going into the country this afternoon, but this changes my plans."

She knew afterwards that he alluded to his weekly visit to the house in Essex, which was destined the same day to be the scene of such startling events.

"By the way, I shall be running into the country for a few days this afternoon," she said carelessly as she rose to leave. "Poor Papa wants a change. I shall take him to Brighton. A little sea air will do us all good."

Was it her fancy, or did he look at her with something of the old suspicion?

"Are you all going?" he asked.

"Yes, I can't leave my friend, Maudie Farrell, behind. She wants a change as much as any of us. And the maid wouldn't stay by herself. I shall lock the flat up for a few days."

"Better leave your address with me, in case I should want to communicate. You say you are only going for a few days, but one never knows what may happen."

Laidlaw had prepared her for a suggestion of this sort.

"My first idea was to stay at some small and inexpensive hotel, but I'm afraid that might not be quiet enough for my father. As we shall be down early, I think I shall look for some lodgings. I will write you my address to-night."

"I would prefer that you telegraphed," he said, looking at her very directly.

She promised that she would. As soon as she left Green Street she turned into the nearest telephone office and called up Laidlaw to acquaint him with this new complication.

Her lover's answer was brief, but not explanatory. "Don't think any more about it; I will go into it further to-night. Go on to West Hampstead at once and stay there. I will be with you at dinner-time."

She was mystified, and in a certain measure apprehensive, in spite of her firm faith in her beloved Carlo. But she obeyed his instructions.

Something was on foot which she did not understand. If Salmon did not get a wire that evening he would be sure she was playing him false. But, of course, Laidlaw had considered all that. She began to understand why he had made her leave the Kensington flat.

Salmon had left his office five minutes after Claudia, telling the clerk that he would not be back again that day. He was engaged for many hours on business connected with the memorandum which had been handed to him that morning. He arrived home about

ten o'clock; his wife was not yet back from the halls.

"Any telegram arrived?" was his first inquiry.

"No, sir," answered the servant. "Mr. Levi is in the dining-room; he's been waiting for you for some hours. He asked for brandy when he came in; he doesn't seem very well."

Salmon was annoyed and disturbed at the non-arrival of the telegram. What did it mean? Claudia was not likely to forget his injunctions.

He went into the drawing-room and saw Levi, looking very pale and shaken. The after-effects of the powerful drug administered to him had not been quite so harmless as Debrose had promised.

Briefly he related the thrilling events that had taken place at "The Laurels." He described his discovery of the two masked men, the release of Blunden; how they had seized and drugged him, so as to render pursuit impossible.

He added a further piece of information, which shook even Salmon's iron nerve.

"As soon as I recovered myself a bit I took a look round, concluding that these men were there for the purposes of robbery. Several papers have been taken away from one of the drawers, including that letter of Claudia Erba's."

Salmon saw light at once. These men were not ordinary housebreakers; they had broken in for a certain purpose. He saw further. He understood now why no telegram had come from Brighton.

A look of intense ferocity stole over his face. The light of murder shone in his eyes.

" That Italian snake is at the bottom of it all. Her flat is shut up, and she thinks she has escaped me. But I'll hunt her down, and when I find her——"

He left the sentence unfinished, but even Levi, callous as he was, recoiled from the menacing gleam in those fierce eyes.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE CURTAIN FALLS

LAIDLAW had left the flat. And Miss Farrell, who had been consumed with impatience, was able to tell Claudia of the visit of Langston and his important message.

"He has actually got the letter?" cried Claudia, in a voice that was half incredulous. Surely the news was too good to be true.

"So he said—and I am sure he was speaking the truth. He wants to meet you to-morrow to be sure that it reaches your own hands. He apologised for not trusting it to me. And, as a man of the world, he was quite right."

Claudia reflected. Laidlaw had given her strict injunctions that neither she nor her friend was to leave the flat till he had given his permission. Her lover knew what he was about; his injunctions must be obeyed.

"Langston must come here, Maudie. Carlo never turns up in the morning, and, besides, he will come as your friend. I will write him a note to that effect to-night. We will get the porter to post the letter. Carlo did not want the maid to go out too often in case she should be recognised."

Her friend agreed. Laidlaw was still very reticent as to his ultimate object, but Miss Farrell firmly believed that his methods were sound and definite. His reticence she admired. A strong man is often a silent man.

Claudia wrote the letter, which was posted in the pillar-box outside by the porter of the flats. She had appointed ten o'clock the next morning. On the stroke of the clock Langston presented himself.

His eyes were shining; his bearing was that of a man who had rehabilitated himself, had made some small amends for a shady and dishonourable past.

After the briefest greeting, he handed her the letter. "I promised I would get it for you. Here it is."

Her eyes were suddenly suffused with tears. He had been an adventurer, and he had suddenly turned into a knight-errant. She felt that he did not want a word of thanks. Impulsively she held out her hand.

"I think to-day I can honestly say I forgive you," she said.

He kissed the delicate hand she extended towards him. "I am much happier for those words, Claudia. My influence on your life, through consequences I could not foresee, was a terribly sinister one. I shall pass out of your existence to-day, content to know that I have done my very best to make amends."

He was restless and uneasy, in a high state of exaltation. His old feeling for her had returned in full force; she was so charming, so desirable. Last night

he was disappointed that he could not see her, to pour out his recital of the strange adventures he had undergone.

To-day he was anxious to get away, with that exciting story left untold. He was afraid of himself, afraid that some incautious gesture or expression, revealing his true feelings, might offend her, with reminiscences of bygone days.

"I have nothing more to say. From to-night I go out of your life, unless—which is highly improbable—you ever need a friend again. I do not feel yet that I have paid my debt in full. I cannot repay in a few hours what you have suffered for so many months."

There was a pathetic humiliation about the man which touched her deeply.

"You must stay just a little longer," she said kindly. "I have a woman's natural curiosity, and I want to know all the details. Tell me everything from the beginning of your journey in the company of that strange friend of yours."

Nothing loath, he complied with her request. After to-day he would never see her more. But it was heaven to be in her company for the short time permitted him.

She listened with breathless attention. She laughed maliciously when he described the ruthless way in which they had dealt with Lewis Levi. She felt she was justified in her mirth. Had she not been exposed to greater danger when the infamous gang, of which he was a member, had forced her to undertake her perilous journey in the submarine?

"And what of your half-brother, perhaps the basest of all of them?" she asked, when Langston had finished his long story.

"He passed away suddenly in the middle of the night. He was always a weakling, I fancied, a bit of a coward physically, although he ran risks that would have daunted more courageous men. His death, I think, solves certain complications. He was red-hot upon denouncing these men, and in that case I was fearful lest you might be brought into it."

Truly Edward Langston was a strange mixture of good and evil, she thought. She was not prepared for so much delicacy of feeling in a man who had led such a career.

When they bade each other good-bye, her voice was very soft and gentle as she said farewell.

"We may never meet again. If you should ever think of me, remember my last words—run straight and keep from all crooked ways."

He kissed her hand again. "I shall always remember them, and I shall be happier still in thinking that you have almost forgiven me for that thoughtless act of long ago."

"I think I have almost forgiven you," she said softly, as she watched Langston pass through the door and out of her life.

. . . . . .

That evening Laidlaw came to dinner. He was keeping very close watch upon his sweetheart in these days, for his own good reasons.

After the meal was over the lovers went into the small drawing-room. Poor old Papa Beppo had taken to his bed since his removal to West Hampstead, and remained there. Miss Farrell, always discreet and unobtrusive, retired to another room.

Claudia was curious about certain things, and she could keep silence no longer.

"Carlo mio, I cannot understand half of what is going on. I think I do understand why you insisted upon our removing from Kensington. But that paper I gave to Salmon, according to your instructions. It meant danger for you, surely."

Laidlaw smiled. "Darling, have I not told you you must not ask questions? One day I will tell you everything."

"Please tell me now," she implored.

For a moment he hesitated. Then he drew a long thin envelope from his pocket, took out a sheet of paper, and held it in front of her.

"Do you recognise that handwriting?"

She uttered a cry of incredulity. "But it is my own—the paper I gave Salmon with my own hands!"

"You gave it to Salmon a very short time ago. To-night it is in my pocket. It means that this clever German spy has been outwitted through me, and with the aid of our Secret Service. When I gave it to you I never intended that it should reach the enemy."

She gazed at him in bewilderment, and then the full force of it all came home to her. She understood what had been in his mind all through. His

own spies had dogged Salmon and his gang and recaptured that precious paper.

She folded her arms about him, and pressed her soft lips to his.

"Carlo, dearest, you are very clever and very subtle," she whispered, in her gentle, caressing voice.

. . . . . .

Two nights later, Claudia was sitting alone in the flat. Laidlaw had promised to dine there as usual, but at the last moment he had telephoned, explaining that he was detained on urgent business, and would not be able to get to her till nine o'clock.

The two women dined alone, and after they had finished their meal Miss Farrell announced her intention of running over to Camden Town to see her friend with whom she had lived before Claudia offered her a home. It was the maid's evening out, and she had left directly after she had cleared the table.

There was a ring at the bell. She looked at the clock—five minutes to nine. It must be Carlo. He had a key of the flat in case of emergency, but up to the present he had never used it.

She opened the door, fully expecting to greet her lover. To her horror, she was confronted by Salmon, his eyes rolling and bloodshot, his face distorted with passion and hatred.

She tried to close the door against him, but he was too quick for her. He threw his great weight against it and forced it back, while he stepped into the hall.

She tried to cry out, to shriek, but her voice was stifled by terror.

Softly he shut the door, then gripped her by the arm and pushed her into the dining-room, still unable to utter a sound. She gave herself up for lost; she could only pray silently that some miracle would happen. Laidlaw would be here directly. If she could only play with him till then!

She sank trembling into a chair. She dare not look upon that fierce countenance, inflamed with fury and hatred.

He stood over her, big and menacing, the red light of murder in his eyes.

"So you thought to escape me—eh—you hussy?" he hissed. "Did you forget my warning that if ever I found you had played me false it would go hard with you?" he cried in a thick voice of anger.

She could make no answer, only moan, and repeat to herself the prayer that, even at this late hour, some miracle might happen.

"You were cleverer than I thought, and you and that cursed English lover of yours have tricked and baffled me. His spies dogged my messenger and stole from him the paper which you gave me, in collusion with him, as a proof of your good faith."

He paused a second, and then added in a grating voice:

"But the last card is mine—mine! and I am going to play it. I told you I had a short way with traitors. Claudia Erba, I am now going to take my revenge!"

For a second she lost consciousness, and then, when

she came to, the miracle had happened. She heard her lover's voice, and summoned courage to look around.

Salmon was standing some paces from her, his face working convulsively, no longer menacing, but cowed and beaten. Laidlaw had covered him with a revolver, and the baffled murderer knew that if he moved a step it would be fired.

"Mr. Salmon—otherwise Herr Schülmann, agent and spy of Germany—your clever game is up," Laidlaw said. "Five of your gang, including Levi and the woman Zerbstein, were arrested this morning; others will be taken to-morrow. We have followed you here, and three police officers are on the stairs, awaiting my signal to arrest you."

Salmon threw a glance of deadly hatred at the speaker, but uttered no word. The end was at hand. Well, he would die game.

The young man pulled a small bottle from his pocket and held it out to the spy.

"Now, I'll give you a sporting chance, arrest or suicide—which? This little bottle of tabloids will perhaps interest you for a moment. One from it will be effective and quite painless, I assure you. Such a termination will solve matters in the simplest and easiest way."

A moment's hesitation, and then the spy stretched out his hand, extracted a tabloid and placed it in his mouth. A few seconds later he fell on the floor.

Laidlaw dropped his revolver, crossed over to his stricken sweetheart, and folded her in a long embrace.

"The long night has passed, my darling; the dawn is breaking," he whispered fondly as he kissed her upon the lips—a hot, passionate caress. "That scoundrel is silenced for ever by his own hand. Now I must call the police."

THE END

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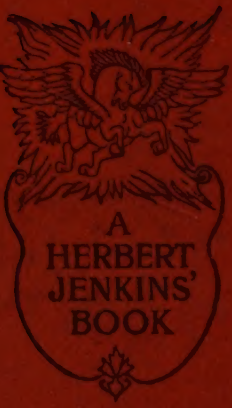
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